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A FOOL'S PARADISE.

A FOOL'S PARADISE.

A Novel.

BY

THOMAS ARCHER,

AUTHOR OF "STRANGE WORK," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1870.

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BOOK I.

Continued.

A FOOL'S PARADISE.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe knew very little of that branch of the family whose representative now stood before her, and all that she had heard referred to a date so distant as to make it quite legendary and unreal. It began with the time when a younger son of the house went out to the West Indies as a sort of gentleman adventurer, to aid in the suppression of the famous Maroon rebellion, and, remaining until he became the possessor of a plantation stocked with a good supply of negroes, who were quoted at a very moderate figure, established his position by marrying a Kingston heiress, and prospered exceedingly.

Her late husband had often told her how the son of this gentleman, one Walter Fairhoe, had visited the paternal halls during the lifetime of his (her late husband's) mother—that mother whose death was said to have been the cause of his quitting home; and how the village folk were astonished by the appearance of a negro footman and a black nurse who accompanied

the handsome creole lady and her little son. The resources of Fairhoe were more liberally taxed to entertain these distinguished relatives than they had ever been known to be for any event before or afterwards, under the old squire's rule; and for years the heart of the youthful Blundell had been periodically gladdened by the arrival of toothsome presents from their Jamaica kinsfolk, who usually sent some substantial token of their regard every six months.

It was afterwards understood that the handsome creole lady had died, and that misfortune had threatened this offshoot of the family tree, so that it had become almost severed from the main stem; but, at any rate, Blundell had never corresponded with his distant relations, and they had almost dropped out of the memories of their kinsfolk, except for a few hours when a pile of old, yellow letters were looked at and sorted, and ultimately burned just after the old squire's death, when Blundell and Waine, and Sharpe, the lawyer, were cursorily looking for a will of which the attorney himself had some vague recollection.

But there were others in that room who remembered the visit already referred to, very well—to wit, the elder Bullpoint, who was then a good-sized boy, and happened to be in the house as Blundell's playfellow; and the vicar (at that time a curate), who had been invited to come after dinner, and had a polemical discussion with the West Indian: and even Ralph himself, who now stood looking at the unexpected guest as furtively and disagreeably as he had gazed at him all those years ago when he was a large-eyed, olive-

coloured infant dandled in the ebony arms of a grinning negress with a bright yellow silk handkerchief bound round her woolly head.

It had happened, too, that the mistress of the house had received a letter from London, with one or two inclosures in the nature of credentials, more than a week before, to say that the gentleman would do himself the honour of reminding his relatives of his existence, but without saying when. It can scarcely be wondered at that she had almost forgotten this in the excitement of the last few days, and, indeed, she had altogether omitted to mention the circumstance, so that she rose to receive the guest not without a sense of confusion, but with a grave and graceful courtesy nevertheless.

"I fear I may have claimed the privilege of a relation at an unlucky moment," he said, as he bent over her hand; "but my excuse must be ignorance of English customs and the necessity for my speedy return to Kingston."

"The moment cannot be other than fortunate that brings one of our name and kin to Fairhoe," she returned. Her own fine manner was stimulated and quickened; for there was something in the stranger which impressed her at once with the necessity for more than ordinary politeness.

"It is one that I have long looked forward to," he said, quickly, as he bowed still lower, "that I might meet a lady who is really the head of our house, and her son, my cousin, who is its legal representative."

Oswald had left Miss Blamyre's chair, and came up

to welcome this unknown relation, to whose entrance his attention had been called by the exclamation of the lady, "Ah! what a delightful creature; is he an Italian impresario or a revolutionary leader? or a corsair? I declare, I believe he is a corsair?"

She had stopped in some confusion; for, although it would have been impossible for him to hear her remarks at the other side of the room, his brilliant eyes seemed to flash over her as she spoke, with a glance that might have taken in the details of every ornament she wore. It had already rested on every other person present; but it seemed to dwell on her for a moment longer, and with some slightly intensified expression, so that even her trained self-possession and consummate hauteur were a little disturbed by it. This, indeed, was the peculiarity which would at first have directed attention to the visitor. Whenever he regarded any person with that look which seemed, so to speak, to absorb them in a single glance, there was an electric influence established between that person and himself, not always to the satisfaction of the former. When he suffered his gaze to linger upon a man's face, that man felt, if he had a hidden weakness or an awkward secret, that here was a stranger who might discover either. We have most of us met such an inquisitor once in our lives—have felt the influence of an eye that seemed to pierce through outward forms and conventional masks, and, like a dark lantern with the slide suddenly removed, to light up for private inspection some of those dim corners and concealed closets of our souls which had been most carefully shut,

even from our own regards. There is no great moral advantage to be derived from this sort of scrutiny. The person who seems to possess the power seldom makes any high use of it. The police inspector turns on his dark lantern and routs out the dim corners and the hidden doorways; but your keenest-eyed detective is an amateur who suddenly flashes on you a conviction that he has read your little secrets and can estimate your carefully-concealed meannesses, and then leaves them untouched, laughing in your angry face, and leaving you to believe that, like a cynical and most pernicious Solomon, he has summed up all human effort and all human character in the one total of Vanity.

Such men as Walter Fairhoe are rare, and that is why the writer can scarcely help dwelling a little upon his appearance. A highly-bred and highly-trained man, with everything about him betokening a fine physicalness, including both the strength and sensitiveness of the Arab horse, or, rather, the supple, delicate vitality of the panther—not its cruelty, but its exquisite strain. Even such mental gifts and accomplishments as he had, and they were many, appeared to be the higher developments of his physical nature rather than anything apart from it. Slight, but with rounded limbs, and almost womanish outlines; below the ordinary height of Englishmen, but admirably proportioned; with an almost indolent ease, which could be instantly roused to fiery force; with fine, delicate features, mobile and yet firm; and with a smile which was both sweet and satirical; he was a rare man, and

made of rare stuff; like a Damascus blade, at once strong and pliable, and with a surface flash of gold, which mingled dazzlingly with the steel, and seemed to form a part of it.

The guests assembled in that room felt this vaguely before he had addressed half a dozen words to each. The younger ladies blushed and fluttered, the diplomats hummed and ha'd; only the guardsman, who was a slow, stolid, massive swell, with no more than the average number of smaller vices, and a taste for billiards; and the good old vicar, whose life might be read of all men as that of a rectangular churchman and an orthodox divine, were unmoved as they returned his greeting, which, by the way, contained just that sort of recognition that sounded like an implied compliment.

Oswald, who had gone forward to do the honours of the house, led him at once to Miss Blamyre, who, without intending it, rose and received him with her best manner as he shot a silent glance from her to Oswald, and quoted a line of some once fashionable poet now almost forgotten. It was when he met Ralph Fairhoe and held out his hand to him that he seemed to become most familiar, for he belonged, as he said, to that generation; but Ralph himself was uneasy under that rapid scrutiny. How could he tell but that this newly-found relative might have known him elsewhere? There was a sort of recognition in the look that disquieted the veteran scoundrel exceedingly, and he sought a diversion by leading the conversation to his daughter, who returned her new

cousin's regards with a flashing eye, combined with a deferential bow, which was almost mocking. In fact, the fair Amina resented the subtle influence which she was unable to escape, and returned that penetrating gaze with one of bright effrontery and defiance, for she was angry, and would rather have been left alone just then to nurse her subdued wrath and misery at Oswald's desertion, since he had resumed his place by Miss Blamyre's chair.

The little excitement which had been caused by the entrance of the visitor subsided as he himself took a seat at the table between Mrs. Blundell and her brother, Sir Langley, with whom he was soon engaged in an interesting conversation, from which he was only aroused by hearing a burst of music from the piano. It was Amina, who had been asked to sing, and she sat down to the instrument and dashed off a rattling prelude, which for the moment hushed the talk that was going on in the room—a prelude followed by a lively, cackling French song full of "amours" and "toujours," and "belle" and "bagatelle," and sung with a spirit which elicited great applause, especially from the military gentlemen present. Somebody else followed, and then Oswald prevailed on Miss Blamyre to "enchant their ears." She played with a grand action, and yet with a sort of slighting grace—as though she held the accomplishment as one of small value, and treated the very music a little contemptuously; but her voice was rich and full, and it was evident that she had learned of the best masters to sing in very good Italian; so she finished with a bril-

liant burst of music, amidst which she swept away to the table where Walter Fairhoe was still sitting listening with keen appreciation.

"Now it is your turn," she said. "You come here amongst us quite suddenly, like a character in a novel, and then sit down to talk politics, or, what is worse, to discuss family affairs, when we are all dying to hear a romance. Come, Sir Langley, help me to persuade this gentleman to amuse us."

"I need no persuasion beyond your commands," he returned, with a bright laugh; "but I warn you you'll be sadly disappointed unless you desire a contrast to your own skill, for I know nothing of musical science; all my efforts are untutored."

This was true in one sense, but he played with wonderful effect, nevertheless: played and sang strange wild songs, some of them his own, others in French and Spanish, and some negro ditties, to which he trilled an accompaniment that sounded dead and muffled, like the notes of a primitive guitar. There was very little conversation while he stayed at the piano; but Ralph, who had contrived to edge near Sir Langley Bullpoint, whispered about the stranger, and heard that he had been making incidental inquiries about the death of the old squire—a subject in which he seemed to have no little interest.

Sir Langley might have added that he had obtained all the information he sought, but that that cold and pompous gentleman was somehow conscious that he had been disclosing more than he had intended, not only about the family affairs, but of the manner in

which old Oswald Fairhoe had managed his property, and had finally died intestate.

All went merry as a marriage-bell, and it is possible that that was just the very kind of merriment at the moment occupying the thoughts of at least two of the younger ladies present, who protested to each other that Mr. Walter Fairhoe was a darling of a man. To these gentle creatures, amidst whom Amina, too, was sitting, half listening to them, and at the same time hearing the burst of wild music which every now and then boomed out from the piano, presently came the lady of the house.

"Is it not beautiful?" said one of them. "Really, dear Mrs. Fairhoe, you ought to be quite proud of your new relative! How is it that we have never heard of him in London—in our set, at least?"

"My dear creature," replied the lady, "he has been everywhere, I think, except London. But, then, he has already devoted himself. There are a Mrs. Walter Fairhoe and a young baby in Jamaica, I assure you; though he certainly is most distingué."

A slight cloud was perceptible on the faces of the speakers, but they rose and grouped about the piano nevertheless. Indeed, most of the gentlemen were already standing listening to the music, and urging the performer to sing and sing again.

Suddenly he leaped up, and, with a sort of weary sigh and a slight flush, apologised for so far forgetting himself as to monopolise the music. He seemed to have awakened from a pleasant, and yet not altogether peaceful, dream, and insisted that one of the fair

listeners should take his place, while he quietly stole away and engaged the old vicar in talk, inquiring, it must be owned, who was the family solicitor of the Fairhoes, who the family doctor, and what had become of the steward who had, he heard, left the land quite suddenly.

To this latter question the vicar shook his head sadly, and would presently have replied by a request that he should be excused from repeating mere rumours; but even before he could speak his companion had hurriedly touched his wrist and made a gesture of silence. Looking up, the vicar saw Ralph approaching from the shadow of a curtain near the window where they were standing.

"I can always feel the presence of some men," whispered Walter, after Ralph had moved away, "and especially of men like our friend behind me. Will you permit me to call upon you to-morrow?"

"Certainly; but let me tell you frankly that I know very little of the family affairs; and forgive an old man for reminding you that it might be more expedient to apply to the lady of the house, or to her son, for information."

For a moment his dark arched eyebrows straightened as they came down over those gleaming eyes; but he smiled as he held out his hand to the churchman, who stood regarding him quite calmly and benignantly.

"You mistake," he said, as a ripe, peachy flush shone through the olive skin of his cheek; "and that you should say what you have just said proves that I

dare not let you remain under so wrong an impression. Tell me only one thing, and then let me ask you a favour."

"Let me have your question, sir?" replied the vicar, "which, pardon me for saying, I make no promise to answer."

"Did Ralph Fairhoe inherit any lands under his father's will?"

"Humph! There can be little harm in my telling you that I never heard of his doing so, because I never heard of a will having been discovered. Now, my dear sir, in what way can I serve you further?"

"First, be good enough to come here to-morrow, after some of these guests have gone home, and meet my cousin, Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, and myself here or in another room, and you shall know the meaning of my questions. May I ask you one more now?"

"Yes; but I must impose the same conditions as before. You know how ill it becomes a priest to be censorious or a busybody in other men's matters."

"I want to know if a farmer of the name of Rivers still lives in your district. I think he was quite a middle-aged man when I last heard of him, but he may be alive yet."

"He is just alive, it is true; but paralysed, and sits always in the chimney-corner, the mere wreck of a man. But his son has the farm, and has worked it to some profit, I should hope. He is, I have heard, the best tenant of Fairhoe."

"Thanks, my dear sir. I will still give myself the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow, if only that I may

justify myself for asking so much that you were properly delicate in telling."

"I don't half like the looks of that cousin of ours," said Ralph, moodily, as he met Oswald on the stair, whence he came up from the lower room where supper was to be laid: "how long is he going to stay?"

"Oh, only a day or two. I rather like him now; but what do you think brings him here, and what difference can it make? Blood's thicker than water, and he seems the best Fairhoe that I have ever known by half. I wish to God that he'd change places with me and take the place and all the honour of the head of the house, and give me a younger brother's portion to start me afresh across seas. I hear he has a wife and child, and—and for that matter——"

Oswald stopped suddenly, with a sort of gasp, and glared wildly at his uncle. He had evidently been drinking, but he mastered himself with an effort, and, with a sickly smile, passed into the room where Amina was sitting beside her newly-found relative, to whom she was talking earnestly. They had, in fact, drawn a couple of chairs into the recess of the window in that older and lower part of the long drawing-room, which was partly separated from the larger space by drapery from ceiling to floor, and as they talked they looked out upon the flower garden and the shrubbery, where a yellow moon threw fantastic flecks and patches of light upon the stiff bronze leaves of sundry hardy evergreen plants, and fringed with silver the solemn feathers of the dark coned firs.

Oswald, who had heard his own name mentioned, went towards them, with Miss Blamyre leaning on his arm.

"I am telling our fair cousin here a legend of our house," said the West Indian without turning his head. "See," he continued, pointing to a dark clump of trees which stood at an angle of the footpath far away. I could imagine that to be the spot where the murder was done. The moonlight is now shimmering white upon the bole of that elm, and looks like a pale ghost, doesn't it?"

"There's something a little more substantial than a ghost there at this minute," said Miss Blamyre, peering out steadily, and with a rather grim laugh. "Look under that tree on the left, and you will see a man who seems to be denouncing us by the way he motions with his clenched hand."

"I've seen him there for above a minute," said Walter; "and, look! there's a woman, too—a woman carrying a bundle. I hope all your plate is safe, Cousin Oswald. Ah!" he exclaimed, suddenly, "what is the matter with your uncle?"

Ralph Fairhoe had, indeed, turned ghastly pale and sank into a chair. To find himself, years after his father's death, a guest in the house that was once his home, had been a strange experience. He knew, too, that he should have to sleep there; and what if they should put him in *that* room! No real beliefs had much power over him, and therefore he felt moving within him that slowly-coiling horror which is the offspring of ill-defined superstition. Now that he saw

that menacing figure under the uncertain moonlight in the shrubbery, his heart seemed to stop, and he must have fallen but for the support of a friendly chair.

"I will see what this means, at any rate," said the West Indian; and before Amina, with a face of alarm, could stay him, he had opened the casement, and dropped lightly upon the roof of the terrace, whence he reached the ground, and, without a hat, ran swiftly across the garden, at the end of which he sprang over the low fence separating it from the shrubbery.

Nearly half an hour had elapsed before he returned, and he came in, laughing at himself for being such a fool as to go on a wild-goose chase.

"I tell you what it is, Oswald," he said, slapping his cousin on the shoulder; "I would get rid of these gipsy fellows; they're worse than our niggers, and, heaven knows, that's a deep graduation in usefulness. Our friend over yonder was nobody but a wandering tinker, with his wife and a child, that has probably been stolen from some cottage door. Do you keep up the stocks now at Fairhoe, or are they amongst the good old institutions abolished by the Radicals?"

There was some bustle and confusion in the room as the company were going down to supper, so that Oswald just muttered some answer, which nobody could hear; but Walter was looking at him with a glance of such significance that it struck Mrs. Fairhoe, who thereupon took up the conversation as she leaned on the new comer's arm.

"I've been telling Oswald the very same thing," she said. "Why these vagrants should ever have been

permitted to swarm on our land I can't imagine. They are always lurking about the place and making mischief with the servants. Why, one of them, I have heard, was actually employed here in the house once, and her father was gardener to your uncle Oswald."

"No, I think not, madam; I think not," interposed the vicar, who had suddenly become very grave and thoughtful. "You speak of Marion Rook, I imagine; but she is no gipsy. She is quite a respectable woman, and well known still in Grundon, though she has many friends among the vagrants.

"Well, she is not very choice in the selection of her company; but that matters little," retorted Mrs. Fairhoe. And so the conversation became general, and everybody settled down at the supper-table.

"By-the-by, what has become of my uncle Oswald's steward? What was his name?—a quaint old Puritan sort of name. Paul, or Silas, or some such title as our negroes adopt. Waine, wasn't it? Silas Waine? I've often heard of him," asked Walter, in a lower tone.

"Oh, he left us some time ago," said Mrs. Fairhoe, in a hurried whisper; "please don't allude to it, it isn't a very pleasant subject just now."

"Pray pardon my unintentional rudeness," he replied, as he went on with his supper; but every now and then he glanced across the table to the place where Oswald sat beside the heiress of Flakestone, and his bent brows came straight again with a puzzled frown, which even Amina's conversation could not entirely dissipate.

At last, one by one, those of the guests who lived in the neighbourhood departed, the vicar going first, as setting a good example; then the ladies went to their several rooms, for there was to be an early breakfast, followed by an excursion the next morning.

The gentlemen, that is to say, the young gentlemen, including, however, Ralph, who thought he sniffed cards in the air, went into Oswald's room to smoke and drink cold brandy and water.

"Do you play at all in Kingston, cousin Walter?" asked Ralph, insinuatingly. "Perhaps we might take a hand before bedtime."

The Jamaican eye seemed to expand; then the pupils contracted into a mere fiery glint, as he broke out into a laugh. "Why," he said, "the fact is, I wouldn't play with anybody here for the price of a king's ransom, whatever that may be. I could no more help cheating than I could help seeing; and so I give you fair warning not to tempt me, for I fancy I know every trick. Some of my fellows are not bad conjurors, and even my black rascal, Juba, could show you a few things with the cards not much worth knowing. By-the-by, I'll just go and look after my room, Oswald, and see that there is a fire to keep the chill from my West Indian blood."

"I'll go up with you," said Ralph. "What room have you given our cousin, Oswald?"

"No, no; don't trouble, pray. I'm in the room beyond the little passage outside the drawing-room door."

Ralph fell back. "*That* room," he muttered, as he helped himself to a fresh glass of brandy.

Now that "black rascal, Juba," as his master had called him, was a woolly-headed, bandy-legged, white-toothed, grinning negro, who had, if possible, become more popular in the kitchen than Walter Fairhoe had been in the drawing-room. To play upon the fiddle which he had brought with him, to sing odd, laughable, barbarous songs, to dance grotesque dances, were his accomplishments; and when once the female servants had got rid of the notion that perhaps he was a sort of minor devil, or ebony demon, they were made quite merry with his antics. But Juba knew what sort of master he had to deal with, and, understanding his requirements, insisted on himself preparing the bed and the fire where the West Indian was to pass the night, for which purpose, and arming himself with a pair of great wax candles, in silver candlesticks, he went up-stairs to the old bed-room mentioned in the early part of this story, which had scarcely been opened since the day when the corpse of the old squire lay on the dismantled bed. Everything there was in disorder. The very bedstead had been moved, and though new hangings had been put to it, they were but hastily fitted. It was a good hour's work to give the place an air even of superficial comfort, when the scanty fire consented to burn, and to send its smoke up the great cold chimney.

It was while waiting for this result that Juba, with the curiosity of his race, began to peep and pry, till he looked like a magnified raven inspecting a marrow-

bone, soliloquising all the time in a rich guttural voice, interrupted by chuckling, which sounded quite unearthly in that disused apartment.

It was not till he had succeeded in opening the door of an old closet next the chimney, however, that he fell into complete abstraction, for it was here that the old bed-hangings had been thrust away by some of the first attendants in that chamber, when those who did the last offices for the dead squire were fetched in hurriedly.

They were of old brocade, these hangings, gay in colour where they were not faded, and of gaudy pattern. "Oh, lor a mussy," said Juba, "what a suit 'ud this make a me, to cut up for meeting-house a Sunday; or what a lubla dress for Phœbe to go to de baptisin' in, along wid dem dam yeller gals. Oh, oh!" and he straightway began to spread out the treasure, over which he gloated with rolling eye-balls. The great square piece which had covered the head of the bedstead was most conspicuous, and he threw it over his shoulders mantle-wise, strutting and cackling about the room in high glee. He had just turned round to look at himself in the small mirror, when he heard something rustling at his feet, and, looking down, saw that it was a square folded yellow piece of paper, which had fallen from a pocket, originally intended for night gear, that still remained attached to the drapery.

"Golly oh! golly oh! What dis here?" he said. "Mebbe it's a bankum note; but anyhow dere ain't no harm to read it, if I was only 'nuff of a skoller. It's

open, anyway, and I mayswell 'ab a look." But at this moment he caught sight of his master's face, who had entered with such a light foot, that he was upon him before he had time to cry out. It was well for him that he had a thick thatch of wool, or the blow from that dainty hand, soft as it looked, might have felled him.

CHAPTER II.

AN AWKWARD CONDITION.

Mr. Juba's howls would have disturbed some of the sleepers, even in distant rooms, had they not been speedily silenced with the aid of a gigantic tassel which hung to a corner of the old brocade, and formed a very effectual gag. As it was, they reached one small upper chamber, where Ralph was listening at the open door; and the battered *roué* quivered a little at the sound, wondering whether anything strange would happen to mark the night when he once more slept beneath the roof, the shelter of which he had forfeited so many years ago. While he stood there, waiting for a repetition of the noise which had arrested him as he was about to open his door, a figure came from another room just beyond his own, and he would have turned and fled, but that he recognised his daughter by the light of the bed-room candle that he held.

"Did you hear that noise?" he said. "What could it have been?"

"Oh! nothing," she replied. "It was a dog howling outside the house somewhere. And what a dreary,

chill, gloomy old place it is! Pray, let us get back to London."

She was flushed and yet shivering, and her hands quivered as she clasped her arms and shrugged her shoulders, over which she had thrown a shawl.

"What's the matter?" said Ralph. "You're quite feverish, Amina. Why are you not in bed?"

"I waited up to speak to you. I thought we should be in the same storey. You know the lower rooms are reserved for the rest of the family—actual or prospective. Lady Flakestone and her daughter are now sitting in the best boudoir, which has been given up to their service, and they are planning everything charmingly, no doubt. The future Mrs. Oswald Fairhoe wants a whole county at the very least, to rule over, if we are to take her own estimate of herself. But I fancy they will be mistaken, and I hope it."

She was so excited that she began to pace up and down the narrow passage. Suddenly she turned, and faced her father.

"You should never have brought him to our place in London," she said, almost fiercely; "you might have known what would come of it. All might have gone well but for that wretched duel, and the right which you gave to the lowest of your friends to insult me, and to bandy my name about in their drunken sport. I'm sorry now that I prevented it. I wish that one or both of them had been shot, and then I would have made a third. I wish that I had never been born, or that we had never met."

"You're quite feverish; and, no doubt, you've had enough to annoy you, Amy," said her father, soothingly; "but I can't understand why you should give way so. Surely your life isn't mixed up with this young fool. Why should it be?"

"He would have risked his for me," she returned, passionately; "and, fool as he may be, I've loved him. I only hope that my love for him mayn't turn to hate; for, if it should, I must fly to save him from myself. I've never known a true girlish feeling, perhaps. God knows! but it seems to me that he has been the only man who has ever treated me as other girls are treated. He made me forget myself and the hard, false, shameful life that was marked out for me from infancy; and yet I don't know how he did it. He could have made me what I ought to be, and what I want to be, if he had chosen, and he *might* have chosen if I could have met him here, instead of at our —our *home*."

She laughed so bitterly and so hysterically as she said the word, that Ralph became alarmed. "See here," he whispered, as he drew her into the room; "there's something I *must* tell you, and you had better hear it now, though I have no proof one way or another. You know what took him to London, and how he holds to his engagement with the old steward's daughter?"

"He would have forgotten her, or, at least, she would only have been a memory and nothing else—a dream—a fancy——"

"Not a bit of it—listen to me, Amy, and don't

tremble, or go off into hysterics. I couldn't tell you everything before; and, in spite of what you've said about your life, and all that, you know that I never suffer a coarse word or a rough oath to pass when you are present. You know that, and by —— I'd shoot any man myself who offered to insult my daughter; and I kept this to myself for the same reason—it wasn't a thing to tell you, and it would have done you no good to hear it."

"What is it, then?"

"There is a child. A child of Oswald and this girl, Barbara Waine."

"Where is it? Has she taken it with her?"

"No, not that; but what will Lady Flakestone say, when she hears that there is a woman on the other side of the world who has a claim upon her future son-in-law?"

Ralph thought that he had made a hit in suggesting this as a piece of possible strategy, or, at all events, of revenge; but he had not counted on the effect of those influences which had wrought upon his daughter's mind. The girl's face settled gloomily, but she shook her head with an expression of contempt, and then, with a great sigh, moved towards the door. "No, no," she said, as if she were struggling with some hidden impulse, "let him be; and if Miss Blamyre's fortune is to help to build up this crazy old house, I will save him from myself, and save myself from what I feel that I could do. I forgot, though," she added, as she turned to her father again, with a look of ten years added age in her downcast face; "does that man who

came here to-night—the West Indian cousin—does he know of this?"

"No; how the deuce should he?"

"I fancy he does; and so would you if you had heard his questions at supper-time. They seem plain enough to me now."

"Why, curse him, he's been questioning all the evening. What was it he wanted to know?"

"What had become of the steward, and why he had left Fairhoe."

"I've another notion about his questioning, Amy. He's been at the old Vicar to know all about the family lawyer, and the family doctor, and the rest of it. I suppose my brother, your uncle Blundell, knew whether his title was sound or not; but if this West Indian isn't here to fish out something about the estate, I never was more mistaken in my life."

"If there's anything to find out, then, he'll find it out, be sure of that," said Amina; "he's cleverer than all of you put together in that way. Poor Oswald! he needs a friend just now, and I wish I was a man for his sake! and yet I feel that I shall hate him before a week is past. Good-night, father. I'm keeping a good woman up. I am to sleep with Mrs. Gabriel; and I wish she had been my mother. Good-night!"

And so she crept away along the passage, with her head bent down, while Ralph shut his door and stood moodily thinking, with his elbow on the mantlepiece, and his crafty face leaning on his hand.

It was quite true that Amina had been quartered

upon Mrs. Gabriel; and that gentle widow, with a heart that yearned towards anything sad or sinful, with a longing hope to comfort or redeem it, had already shed a gentle light upon the motherless, and, as some would have said, worse than fatherless girl.

By some subtle womanly instinct she had discovered her secret, even in the drawing-room, when she sat looking at her as she watched Oswald hanging over Miss Blamyre's shoulder. She had seen and pitied that poor, clever, wayward, perverted child, with all dangerous instincts developed into full bloom before a childlike virtue had had time to bud.

Such comfort and sympathy as could be shown in that gentle face, surrounded by the fair hair, in the pale, golden glory of which a thread of shining silver was here and there mingled, was given freely; and the quick appreciation of the girl, whose heart was softened for a short time, saw it readily.

Little did Ralph Fairhoe think that his daughter's head had been for once in her weary life pillowed on a gentle, loving breast, and that broken confessions and complaints had been whispered and sobbed to a trustworthy ear.

It would have been well for Amina if the good influence had lasted but longer. Had she stayed there in that little plainly-furnished chamber, instead of seeking the passage when she heard her father's step, a new influence might have come upon her; but now she went back still and hard, and with a lowering gloomy look that seemed to shroud her quick, eager face.

Mrs. Gabriel saw at once that she had changed back again; that the water of life had returned into the rock for a time, or had been frozen somehow. "Had you not better go to bed, my dear?" she said, presently. "Our fire burns low."

It burnt so low that only a few coals lay crumbling in the grate; but these, falling together, threw up a fitful glare, and by this light Amina looked into her companion's face, and, touching her hand, said, in a low, even voice, "You never told me that they had a child."

"A child! Of whom are you speaking?" said Mrs. Gabriel, in a whisper.

"Of Oswald Fairhoe and Barbara Waine, if that is the creature's name. To think that I should have only heard of this to-night!"

"Oh, my poor sister! my poor sister!" moaned the widow, as she bent her face. "What have you done? and how can this be remedied?"

She knew not how, indeed; for she had had bitter experience of the pride which neither human suffering, nor wrong, nor justice, had power to quell; and so, with a heart full of pity and sorrow, she knelt beside the bed. And Amina, looking at her with a sort of wistful wonder, sat immovable, not venturing to disturb the silence that was only broken by the pattering of the rain upon the windows. So they went to bed, almost without a word; but Mrs. Gabriel, hearing a sob beside her, ventured to put her arm round her companion's neck, and then a tear and a kiss fell softly upon her imprisoned hand.

It was a remarkable fact that so few of the guests at Fairhoe should have been asleep that night until the night itself had passed, and the clock in the hall struck one, after a preliminary whirring, which could be heard at that silent hour, and sounded like the wheeze of some ghostly asthma. Lady Flakestone and her daughter, after having dismissed the maid, who came to mitigate their daylight charms, sat in the room devoted to the former lady, with their slippered feet upon the fender, basking in the light and heat of a clear, red fire; for the night was damp and chill.

"I don't think, my love," said the elderly lady, suppressing a yawn, which showed her rather cadaverous face to shocking disadvantage, under a full-bordered lace nightcap; "I really do *not* think that you could do better. It's a good old name—better really than our own for that matter—and he may overcome the absurd prejudice of the family about a title. Of course, he *will* overcome it when you bring your influence to bear; and then the land is really enough to give him a very respectable stake in the country. He's young, agreeable, all that any young woman could desire."

"Do not, for Heaven's sake, mamma! talk in that way," retorted Miss Blamyre, responding to the yawn. "He's very well, no doubt, and I may like him very much by-and-by, if the powers that be decree an alliance between us. But I m not desperately in love with him at present."

"My darling! pray, p ray be more prudent in your

remarks. I must say that I deplore a sort of—of what shall I say—really an almost plebeian way of expression in which you sometimes indulge."

"What a pity that you should have a daughter who is so bad a representative of your most aristocratic origin, my dear mamma," retorted the daughter, with a scornful flash of her proud eyes and a satirical laugh. The remark brought a slight angry flush to the yellowish cheeks of the dowager, for it told only too well. Lady Flakestone was the daughter of a rich London tradesman, who, having gone, as he said, "into the wholesale," called himself a merchant. Her dowry had attracted the attention of a landless lord, whose eldest son, just of age, happened to dance with her at a civic ball, and so Miss Firkin had become Emily Blamyre, and ultimately Lady Flakestone. Her husband wanted money, and she had been taught to look for a title, and now her daughter's aspiration was both for a title and landed estate, so ambition had been married to ambition, and here was the result: a proud, imperious, dominant, relentless beauty, sarcastic at the expense of her own mother, and a withered, fashionable dowager, forgetting her father and the source of the wealth which had paid for her recognition in the paradise of rank and society.

They were alike, this mother and daughter, and yet they were someway contrasted. The elder lady was slender, rather angular, cold, and, when her rouge was off, yellowish. Her face wore a weary, half-dreamy expression, too, now that it had lost its habitual slightly-supercilious simper, as though she were privately

looking back for half-forgotten years and mislaid joys which she had neglected too long to have any hope of finding. As she sat there, wrapped in a warm dressing-gown, she seemed to shrink a little, and to cower before the fire, as the savage might cringe when he had washed off his war-paint and hung up his arms, and tassels, and beads, and feathers in the wigwam. Her daughter, on the contrary, lay back in the low chair, with one massy arm hanging lazily over the cushion, as she played with the bracelet which had just slipped from her rounded wrist. Her fine form expanded somewhat with the ease of her demi-toilet; the fire had brought a slightly heightened colour to her peachy cheek; the rather full mouth and chin, which she perhaps inherited from her maternal grandfather, was set in a half-contemptuous smile that would have done honour to the proudest Flakestone whose name figured on the family tree; and her dark eyes looked half-impatiently from beneath the drooping, long-lashed lids.

"I confess he's too mild, and a little too fair for me," she said, shrugging one round shoulder till it made her heavy ear-ring tinkle. "He sighs and looks pensive, and seems to have a secret sorrow which could only be told in verse. I'll bring out my album to-morrow and ask him to write in it. That's his *métier*, you may be sure. I confess, now, that I like this new cousin, our West Indian friend, better, though he's something of a charlatan. There's a spice of—of (pray pardon me, Lady Flakestone, mamma mine) —of devil in him that suits my temper better. Pity

he isn't the heir of Fairhoe; and yet I grant you he wants the true *bel air*, and Oswald has that somehow."

"Yes, yes, my dear, I knew you saw that; and, after all, that is better than mountebank tricks and accomplishments; it is better even than money, and I had almost said than title, Caroline; nothing can purchase that, nothing—and nothing can ever teach it, I think."

"Hum: probably," responded the scornful lady, as she looked at her mother in a way that once more brought the colour to her cheeks.

"My dear," said Lady Flakestone, rising with some dignity, "however superior you may be to me in rank, and birth, and station, and accomplishments, permit me to remind you, that you have had less experience, and I would seriously advise you not to encourage the habit of deteriorating a man who may become your husband, or even to compare him to others, except to his advantage. You will forgive me for remarking that I think my unavoidable relation to you warrants me in saying this much," and she swept a long curtsey, bending almost to the ground.

"Brava! brava!" shouted Miss Blamyre, springing up, and putting her arms round her mother's waist. "You can beat me at satire any time you like, and you are my own mamma when you act like that. Let me kiss you, and believe me that, when I am Mistress Oswald Fairhoe, there will be no wife more jealous of her husband's honour. Come, get away to bed, you dear old thing, and I'll come and see your light safe

for you. Good Heavens! What's that!" she ejaculated, as Juba's howl resounded down the corridor.

Lady Flakestone listened. "It's your mountebank beating his negro," she said, laughing. "I recognise the sound quite well. We had a black servant at Flakestone Hall who cried out just in that way when your father used to lay his whip across his shoulders. Good-night, darling."

The prostrate Juba lay, with his eyes rolling horribly, until his master's attention was so absorbed by the contents of the paper which he held in his hand, that he moved towards the table where the candle flared in the draught from the open door. Then the negro ventured to disentangle one of his hands, to take the worsted gag from his mouth, quietly to roll himself up in the brocade, and, finally, to keep on rolling until he had rolled into the little dressing-room adjoining the old chamber. It must have been an interesting document which so absorbed Walter Fairhoe as to leave him unconscious of this move; and, indeed, after he had read it through he continued to look at it, whistling softly to himself all the time.

"Where did you find this, you villain?" he said, presently, without taking his eyes from the writing. "Oh! I've a good mind to leave you here to be hanged."

"No, no, don't you do dat, mas'r; you leave poor Juba 'lone. Dat paper he drop down from ceilin' or suthin right down on ma feet when I look to see whar dis bu'ful stuff fit behind. I sleep quite cumfable in dis, mas'r; de colour keep me so warm widout no

fire in dis piece ob a room where I put all mas'r's traps."

As these remarks were delivered from behind the half-closed door of the dressing-room, whence Juba's woolly head protruded about a foot from the floor, his master was forced to temporise; and, by dint of persuasion and many promises, induced him to unwind himself, and complete the arrangements for sleeping. It was not till after he had mended the fire, laid out a morning suit, helped his master on with a wadded dressing-gown, placed a case-bottle of rum beside the water-flask upon the table, and brought in a small brass-bound leather writing-case, that he was permitted to retire, with a couple of travelling-rugs and a fur-lined coat instead of the tapestry, which Mr. Fairhoe had made him replace in the closet, and was now busily examining.

It concealed no more papers, however; and so, lighting a cigar, and mixing himself a tumbler of cold grog, the West Indian drew the table to the fire, and, after taking a folded letter from the pocket of his writing-case, leaned back in the low, chintz-covered chair, and compared the two documents.

"No doubt about it," he muttered to himself, as he placed them in the case. "The letter is older than this paper, and the will was made when that letter was written. If Waine hadn't gone away, now, I might learn something more definite: the paper is addressed to him. The will is at the Rivers's, that's certain, if it isn't burnt or destroyed. I wonder whether Blundell, this boy's father, knew of it, or if Oswald or his

mother know! I fancy not; but Ralph does—that hangdog cousin of mine; and, unless I mistake, he had something to do with the old man's sudden determination to leave the unentailed land to our branch. I don't know that I shall accept the condition, though, even if emancipation is to ruin the West Indies. To live here at this dull place, and settle down into a second-rate proprietor, would scarcely suit me; and yet—and yet—um! ha!—we shall see. Everything depends on the dogged fidelity of the Rivers's, whoever they are. And the old man's paralysed, too. 'They are only to produce the will when you arrive to claim possession.' So says the letter; but the old gentleman scarcely counted on such a long delay. Surely Rivers would never keep the secret for a quarter of a century, unless he's either an idiot or a great philosopher; and yet, *quien sabe?* No, no! old Oswald expected that his kinsman, my father, would rush on the wings of ambition to establish his claim as a Fairhoe of Fairhoe, as though beech was more valuable than sugar, and pasture more aristocratic than coffee. I'll be up early, at any rate, and ride over to see the lawyer; and I'll call on the Vicar, too. It will be well to have something to fall back upon, and the back rents will come to a pretty sum, if I can make my little cousin pay them; but I won't be hard upon him. How would it answer to bring over a nigger colony, and settle down on an English plantation?"

And with this pleasant conceit Mr. Walter Fairhoe, having locked his chamber door, and given Juba a

slight reminder, in the shape of a gentle kick, that his snores were a little too obtrusive, went to bed, and fell asleep in an instant, in spite of the flickering lights on the oaken panels and the shadows that flitted on the walls.

He was down to breakfast, as fresh and neat as a new pin, almost before any of the other guests were stirring — his cheeks cleanly shaved by Juba's expert hand, his black moustache trim and glossy, his faultlessly-fitting clothes without a speck, his linen fine and white; and with a look of keen enjoyment in his face, as he stood at the window of the breakfast-room, sniffing the early air, which came laden with autumn's last perfumes from the woods, but was so fresh and crisp as to send him to the fire, where he stood, with one small, firm, neatly-booted foot upon the fender.

Oswald and his mother came in presently, apologising for being later than their guest; but he laughed their excuses lightly away, and then, with a sudden change of manner, begged for a few minutes' serious conversation while they were still alone.

"I must ask you, first," he said, fixing his eyes on Mrs. Fairhoe, "whether you ever heard of a will made by your father-in-law? It is a question I need scarcely put to you, I'm sure; but I am one of the family, and I have a strange revelation to make, and one which my stay here for the last few hours has enabled me singularly to verify. Did your late husband ever mention that his father had made a will, which, I can well understand, might have been revoked on his son's

marriage with a lady who would do so much honour to our house as yourself?"

As he glanced from mother to son, he saw that there at least was no concealment. Mrs. Fairhoe looked up, surprised, and met his glance with a look of rather cold hauteur, though she bowed at the compliment his speech conveyed.

"I remember that my husband thought that there might be a will," she said, "though he had never heard of one, and that some search was made at the time of his father's death. I never believed it probable. Had there been one relating to my brother-in-law, Mr. Ralph Fairhoe, there were reasons why it should have been superseded; but there was none. You have been misinformed—probably by some report which, had it been true, would surely have reached you at the time, and through our solicitor."

"Pardon me; I almost wish it may be so; but I may at least convince you that I am not acting through mere idle curiosity. Look at that"—and he placed before her the letter which he had taken from his writing-case the night before.

"Read it, Oswald," she said, handing it to her son.

It was dated at a time just after her own marriage, and before Oswald's birth, and was carefully addressed by superscription to "My cousin, Walter Fairhoe, of Kingston, Jamaica;" after which it went on to say how the writer, alienated from one son, and foreseeing no comfort from the other, had at that time made a will, by which the unentailed estate should come to the said Walter Fairhoe or his heirs male, if any, on con-

dition that the said Walter or his said heirs should return to England and take up their title by living on the estate, and so on, in set amateur legal phraseology, concluding with the statement that the will itself was left in charge of "my old trustworthy friend and tenant, John Rivers, holding the land known as River's End Farm, part of the said unentailed estate, who will keep his own counsel as to this matter until you shall come to claim your right as the representative of a branch of our house and bearing our name."

Mrs. Fairhoe looked a little dismayed as Oswald read this, but the cold, haughty look deepened on her face. "You have very good ground for your inquiry, no doubt," she said, and her hand trembled a little as she handed their visitor a cup of tea. "But, of course, you either have the will itself and the proofs of it in your possession, or it has been procured by a respectable solicitor. I should like to consult my brother on the point; for——for—— I must entreat your pardon, Mr. Fairhoe; but you are little more than a stranger to us, personally, though I throw no doubt upon your word."

"I swear to you that I have taken no steps whatever," he returned, warmly; "and I am about to ask my cousin Oswald to go with me this very morning to the Rivers's, if, indeed, there be any such people, and we will call on your lawyer by the way. On your lawyer and on the Vicar, too. Surely, madam, you do not think that I am altogether glad?"

"Few people would be sorry to come into an estate," she returned, with something almost like a

sneer. Her heart was full of a sort of cold, desperate anger.

What would be the end of it? Here had she been scheming and planning for her son, spending and mortgaging too, as she knew and felt with a bitter pang that was not unmingled with fear; and now a stranger claiming kinship came to snatch away half the inheritance, if, indeed, he was not the charlatan which Lady Flakestone had called him, and a mere adventurer trying to frighten them with a trumped-up story. Even then, in the confusion of this sudden revelation, she felt how improbable it all was; the long date of the letter; the chances of concealment for so long a time; the difficulty of proof; but she felt a chill at her heart nevertheless; and there was something in the West Indian's look which daunted her, for his eyes seemed to flash fire at her retort, and he clenched his white, muscular hand upon the table as he hid his anger by a smile that had in it something very tigerish. Upon Oswald the effect was different; he sat there quite silently regarding his plate with a troubled face certainly, but without any very anxious expression. What could Fortune do to him worse than she had done already? Suppose this strange cousin should really become the head of the house, as he had almost wished he might be, and that he could drop down into a mere cadet and have done with ambition, family pride, and all that had wrought him so much evil; and yet, who was this man who came suddenly with such a claim that he should oust him from his right? and then that haughty beauty, who was so willing, as he had been

informed, to bear the name of Fairhoe, would she?—no, that was impossible. Walter Fairhoe had a wife already in Jamaica—a wife and child. And had not he? Oh, that he could die! or that he might go out at once and overtake her upon the sea and there sink to rest together, and leave this hateful life! Where was the child now—*his* child, and where was she?

Was there more of deep regret and love, or of selfish remorse in these wild, wandering thoughts and bitter memories? Who can tell whether the thought of what *might* have been but for the result of that first boyish passion, had not begun to haunt him, and whether even the presence of that haughty lady who had already encouraged him to ask her to bear his name, had not wrought upon him with its own power to bring him a new misery?

As he looked up his face showed the struggle that was going on within him. Dull and passionless as were his looks, his eyes gleamed and his jaws were clenched, and in that moment he almost wished that the bullet of Flasher Skidd had finished him, or that he could stand in the same way before Walter Fairhoe with the same chance of death.

The West Indian remained with his clenched hand still upon the table, waiting for him to speak, but he said not a word until their eyes met, and then, returning that bright glare with a sudden stare of defiance, he rose from the table. "You know what will be the consequence of this claim of yours turning out to be unfounded," he said, almost savagely. "I need not say now what I shall be compelled to say then. Your

words seem to imply some charge of concealment against my father or against me, and it will be necessary for you to answer for them to the present head of the family."

Mrs. Fairhoe looked at her son in mingled admiration and alarm; their guest broke into a low, melodious laugh, and the glare in his eyes turned into a sunlight ripple. He sprang from his seat and seized Oswald's hand.

"I swear to you, on my soul, that I am proud to bear your name," he said; "but I deny that I have a shadow of such a doubt as you have mentioned, and I disclaim any such base suspicion. I claim nothing. I ask you, as a gentleman and as a man of honour, to clear up a mystery which was none of my making; and, if ever I should come to establish such a right as that mystery implies, I shall be but a mere appanage of your house and loyal to its mistress."

Oswald started and frowned at this latter phrase, but he was reassured when he saw his cousin stoop suddenly and lift Mrs. Fairhoe's hand to his lips.

Even her cold pride gave way before such fervid good humour. "Let it be cleared up at once, then, I beg," she said, with a sigh; "and I need scarcely ask you, sir, to say nothing to any of the guests in the house; it will be known soon enough, as all misfortunes are."

"Don't call it misfortune, madam," returned Walter. "You know from this letter that I must establish my claim, and I promise you I can't leave Jamaica for some time to come; while, as to the past, I must go to

Chancery to establish my right to recover the revenues of these lands, and I am neither foolish enough nor rich enough for such a luxury. One moment," he added, as Oswald was about to ring the bell. "My father never dreamed of coming here to take this to himself; but you know with what our colony is threatened; and in the expectation of what may be the result, he made this known to me less than a year ago. But I have to ask you to read another document which has been in this house all these years, and which was found in the room where I slept last night by my own servant. May I trouble you to ring now, if you please?"

Oswald rang, and then remained standing on the hearthrug, wondering what would come next. A servant came; then Juba, who carried the writing case in his hand.

"Go and bring down the red hangings that you found in the closet last night, and show this lady how you came by the paper that I took from you," said his master.

The negro was down on his knees wallowing at Mrs. Fairhoe's feet in a moment; he had some vague notion that he was to be hanged after all. He protested his innocence, with occasional interludes of piteous howling and supplication, until Mrs. Fairhoe became a little alarmed; and so to finish the scene, which had lasted long enough to convince everybody of the truth of his discovery, Walter led him to the door by an ear, into which he whispered a menace, which so far brought him to his senses that he presently reappeared with

the brocade, and went through the previous night's performance with all the pride of a successful actor.

There was nothing to be done. The document was of no more value than the letter; and it only remained for Oswald to order the horses to be put into the carriage, and to drive to Grundon without delay, that they might return in time for the excursion to which the ladies of the party were looking forward. The paper contained a mere recapitulation in brief of the terms of the will, and a few directions to Silas Waine, to whom it was addressed, to write at once to Jamaica and urge a settlement. Had he so written? Walter Fairhoe said no, but Oswald thought bitterly that he might be now on his way thither. Who could tell but he might have given a false destination, and so, sailing by another ship at the last moment, be on the route to Kingston.

"We need scarcely take the carriage; let us ride over, that is if you can give me a mount," said Walter; "and then the Vicar and Sharp can come on in a hired trap. We will go to the lawyer first, and a trot along the road will do us good, for, to tell you the truth, your English autumn is a little cold for my West Indian blood." In this way it was settled, and to Oswald's satisfaction, who felt that he might retain a moody silence if they were galloping along the high road at a good pace. This anticipation was scarcely realised, however; for either the stirring exercise, the fresh, sweet air, or the genial good humour of the accomplished horseman who kept beside him, thawed the young man's temper, and before they had gone half

the distance they were talking as though the object of their journey had been forgotten.

There could be no doubt as to both papers being in old Oswald Fairhoe's writing, Sharp said, and he himself was not much surprised. He had vaguely remembered the signing of a will, and had, indeed, witnessed it, he thought, when he first came to Grundon as a clerk on trial to old Fyfar, the solicitor. He knew nothing of the contents of what he was asked to witness; but if that will were in existence it would bear his signature.

Oswald had become gloomy again; but his cousin, leaning on his shoulder, begged him to believe that he was loyal, and that he was only acting under his father's orders; and there was such fascination in those looks and tones that his weaker nature succumbed and yielded a reluctant belief.

River's End Farm—or rather the farmhouse—was a queer, low-roofed, long, straggling building, lying on the very edge of the Fairhoe estate, in a bend of the stream where it broadened into a sort of shallow lagoon, once the haunt of wild ducks and water-fowl, and even now noted for its preserve of fish, which were too lazy and too well fed to rise to a fly, or to nibble the most tempting bait that ever graced a hook. It had once been a great joke of Farmer Rivers to grant leave to ambitious anglers to fish off a little white wooden bridge near his house, whence they might see the fat trout and chub wallowing in their haunts beneath the great stones or overhanging banks, and spend a day in the patient hope of taking home a

basketful; but scarcely one of them was ever rewarded by the capture of a fin, except one 'cute hand, who, having a knowledge of chemistry, turned up some of the plumpest on to their speckled backs and made off with a dozen pounds or so, closely pursued by the farmer himself, who thenceforward forbade trespassing and had the white bridge sawed down.

But this farmer was past active duty of this or any other sort, and now sat in the corner of the wide chimney in the long, low-ceilinged "keeping-room," where he had sat as a child watching the feathery flakes of the wood fire, or roasting nuts and potatoes in the ashes. He was little better than a child again, as he crooned over the hearth in his high-backed wooden chair, his limbs paralysed, and his shaking head rendering such speech as he had left to him more indistinct every day.

It was a queer, rudely-furnished apartment, with a long dresser, and a great spindle-legged table, and hard, knobby, uncomfortable chairs, and a row of tankards and platters on the shelves, and a great high chimney-piece over the yawning fire-place, above which was a closet, the door of which was seldom opened, but which was supposed to contain certain family treasures, and had once held the money and plate that was now intrusted to the keeping of the bank at Grundon.

Only old Rivers, his son, and his son's wife, with such servants as they kept about them, lived in the ancient, rambling, one-storied building, behind which stretched a long, irregular series of barns and out-

houses. For the Rivers's had no young representatives, John, the younger, being childless, and his hard-featured, heavy-eyed wife unblessed with the cries of little voices or the patter of little feet, that might have lightened the dull old place and brought a ray or two of cheerfulness into her gloomy face. John, the younger, was himself a square, heavy, awkward, and rather morose man, who sometimes resented his father's growing imbecility, but was content to go about his daily work dumbly and doggedly, like an animal—or rather like a man without much hope or thought beyond the mere round of daily wants and the pleasure of accumulating. Year after year, the account at the Grundon bank had swelled; and, if the farmer looked forward to anything with more than a passing feeling of anticipation, it was to the day when his father's account would be added to his own. Meanwhile, the father had enough sense and will left to grip his own money tightly; and, though he could remember little else, and often forgot his own age, and jumbled events and dates sadly, he knew to a penny what he was worth, and kept a series of greasy little memorandum-books always under the flat chintz-covered cushion of his chair. There was no disagreement between father and son, and there was no want of kindness to the old man in all material respects; but yet one knew that the other waited for his death, and the other knew that he knew it, and sometimes thought that like Charles the Second, he was "an unconscionable time a-dying."

Old John Rivers had been a different sort of person,

too, in his day, and before he had settled down to saving was a keen sportsman, a bold rider, and sometimes a boon companion at the county dinners, where he sang a good song, and could take his three bottles and a pint of punch afterwards, like a man. Now he was a withered, loose-limbed, trembling old creature; all his once sturdy frame huddled up together, and his ruddy cheeks yellowed and fallen in. He required looking to, lest he should fall forward into the fire in his afternoon sleep, and cried if they forgot to put enough sugar to his tea. It was to him that the party were ushered in by Mrs. Rivers, who sent a man to fetch her husband while she dusted chairs for the visitors.

The Vicar drew one to the side of the old man, and touched him kindly on the hand.

"Well, friend Rivers," he said, "how are you to-day? I've brought one or two gentlemen to pay you a visit, if you're well enough to speak to them."

"Oh, ay! Oh, ay!" responded the old fellow; "I mind when a good many of 'em used to come—to come a fishin'. Oh, oh! and there they'd stand and try all day—he, he, he! and never get so much as a nibble; but that's all done wi' now. None o' your damned tricks for me, pisonin' o' the fish; and so I had the bridge cut down. D'ye mind, parson? you can't go over the stream now save by the punt as lays just yonder. But you ha'nt called for tithes, surely; they've been all paid, I tell ye," he continued, with an artful, scheming look in his pale, withered face.

"No, no," said the Vicar, thoughtfully. "No; I don't want money; I've come over with your young landlord, Mr. Oswald Fairhoe here, and we want you to tell us something."

"What is it?" he said quickly, a ray of intelligence lighting up his faded eyes as his one reliable hand hastily felt for the memorandum books beneath the cushion. "I don't know nothing about money matters; I leave that to my son John. Why don't he come? Why don't you send for him?" he whimpered to his daughter-in-law.

"He'll be here presently," said the Vicar, gently; "see, here's Mr. Sharp."

"I don't want to see 'im; I don't want no law, it's too costly for the likes o' me."

"And here's another gentleman, Mr. Walter Fairhoe, from Jamaica; you've heard of him, perhaps?"

"What? What's that you're a talking on, parson? Let me look at 'im;" and the old man made an ineffectual effort to get off his chair, as he glanced at each person in succession.

"Come a little closer," he said, passionately; "how d'ye suppose I'm to see all that damned way off."

They all came round the fire.

"That's he, that's he; but he's younger and I'm older," he cried, pointing to the West Indian; "who said Oswald Fairhoe was here? He must be an old man now. Why, what am I talkin' on? he's been dead many a year; and I mind he left me a summut for Walter Fairhoe if he should ever come for't."

"I am Walter Fairhoe, and I have come for it," said the West Indian, standing before him. "Here is Oswald Fairhoe's letter to my father. You knew my father, Mr. Rivers?"

"Where's John, where's John?" whined the old man, who had relapsed again almost hopelessly. "Yes, as you say, there aint no money to lay out in farming nowadays, and I can't take much except a little tea and spoon meat; doctors' stuff ain't no good to my complaint. Ah! yes, Master Oswald was a hard landlord. We suited each other, too, we did. Where's my son John, I wonder? He might do better than to marry that gal that he's got in his head."

These soliloquies, which might have been embarrassing to most women, but which Mrs. Rivers received with a stolid frown, were interrupted by the arrival of the younger Rivers, who came in with rather abrupt salutation, and asked shortly what was their pleasure. He recognised Oswald and the Vicar, however, and shook hands with them a little more civilly, asking them what they would take to eat and drink?

"The truth is that we have heard a very strange report as to the existence of a will of your old landlord, Mr. Oswald's grandfather," said Mr. Sharp, "and we wanted to inquire whether you know of any such document. I may tell you at once that it is said you had it to take care of, in case of a Mr. Walter Fairhoe coming to claim a legacy under it."

John Rivers's stolid face showed no sign of assent or dissent. He looked at the lawyer from under his

heavy half-closed eyes, and was slowly making up his mind what answer he should give when the old man actually sat upright in his chair for the first time in many months, and said in a high, quavering voice, but with tolerable distinctness,—

"You mind my promise, John. And this is Mr. Walter Fairhoe's son. I know 'im from his likeness to his father. Let him see the will, d'ye hear, and then don't you part with it without a receipt from the lawyer and the Vicar. One on 'em's a honest man, and I'll not say which. O! ho!—he! he! he! You take the key out o' my breeches-pocket, John; and take and open that there left-hand door, and they can see what they want, but they'd best not take it away, John; they'd best leave it; else when I've kept my promise to the dead, I shan't have nought to live for no longer." His voice quavered away into an uncertain tone, his limbs collapsed, and he sank into his chair a mere heap of bones and skin, covered with a few frayed old garments. No more coherent talk could be expected from him, and John and his wife exchanged a glance which had in it something singularly unpleasant. Then the farmer found the key in the old man's pocket, and, opening the closet above the fireplace, took out a parchment, yellow, and covered with dust.

There could be no doubt about its being old Oswald Fairhoe's will; there was his long, legible, skeleton-like signature; and there the neat, official writing of Mr. Sharp as one of the witnesses. The other witness was old Rivers himself; but he was too far gone just

now to recognise his own hand; and after some necessary formalities, of which, however, the younger John professed to have grave doubts and suspicions, the document was carried away, to be deposited in Mr. Sharp's strong box.

That night a messenger came over to Fairhoe to say that old Mr. Rivers had died at sundown, and that young Mr. Rivers would be glad, if it pleased Mr. Oswald Fairhoe, to know who would be the future landlord of the End Farm.

CHAPTER III.

THE MISSING LINK.

Mr. Philip Ravel sat in his solitary chambers day after day, brooding a great deal, reading a little, smoking more than was good for him or for any man, and eating very little. The two clubs of which he was but a remiss member at the best of times now saw him not at all; he abstained from all kinds of parties, was missed at a certain table-d'hôte which he used to frequent, and never went out until after dusk, and then in morning dress and for a lonely constitutional walk either in one of the parks or through the less frequented streets. A week of this kind of life had made him, perhaps, a little more haggard in appearance, a little more depressed in manner; but he was not plunged into unusual melancholy, nor had the burden of life grown heavier, if his life had ever known a burden at all. He was debating with himself—and for gentlemen of his disposition to make up their minds is frequently a long and difficult operation, especially when the subject under consideration is the result of a romantic wish or a disinterested purpose.

It was because the barrister had formed such a wish, and had steadily brought himself to entertain

such a purpose, that he so often smiled grimly to himself, called himself a fool, threw his cigar into the fire, started up, and——almost immediately sat down again, lighted a fresh cigar, and became once more immersed in deep thought.

"I will give myself a clear week to think about it," he said, the day after Oswald's departure ; and he had already added three days to the time without coming to a definite conclusion.

The question was, should he start off himself on a voyage to Australia for the purpose of bringing back Barbara Waine and her father, that she might become Mrs. Fairhoe ?

A romantic and altogether ludicrous inquiry, no doubt. He was perfectly conscious of its extreme absurdity, as he sat there, smiling grimly, with his square-cut temple leaning on his thin, white hand. But it occurred to him with some force, nevertheless ; and he was a man quite capable of doing anything ridiculous when he had a strong motive. It is astonishing what Quixotes some of these calm, depressed, cool, cynical sort of men can be when once their nature is roused into accord by the stirring music of some dominant note of principle or passion.

On the whole, it may be doubted whether your apparently cheery good fellows, your back-slapping, hearty, strong-digestioned, full-blooded men are not, as a rule, most calculating and selfish. Taking off a large discount for health and animal spirits, and a gurgling richness of expression in their method of salutation, they may be very sorry friends after all ;

whereas the man who, in spite of dyspepsia, natural reticence, habitual reserve, and an entire system tuned three quarters of a note flat, yet does real, unselfish kindnesses, and can on occasions screw himself up to concert pitch, and melt your soul with harmony, must have a great reserve of true human gentleness and goodness which would lead him on to a social martyrdom, for which nobody gives him the slightest credit.

Well, Philip Ravel was, perhaps, a man after this kind; but then he had a motive in this case which, while it might have operated in quite a different way with a mean man, went far to confirm him in his half-cherished purpose. He had himself loved Barbara almost without knowing it, and had only awakened to the strength of his passion when it was all too late.

He had seen her, perhaps not more than a dozen times, while she was staying with his Aunt Petifer; and on those brief visits when he would go home with his uncle to a snug little dinner at the old house in Deerfoot-lane—cosy festivals, and yet with a sort of quiet ceremony about them, assumed with the best plate and the delicate china dessert-service.

She was such a demure, wistful little creature, and sat so quietly in her pure muslin frock, and a bright ribbon binding the soft masses of her golden hair and contrasting with her fresh, fair face, that he had sat looking at her as she bent over her dainty little piece of needlework until her image had somehow stolen into his heart before he was aware of it. But he had spoken to her, too, about some of her favourite books,

and about Fairhoe, and her father; and her simple modest talk had refreshed this tired, worldly recluse more than he had at first believed, and far more than she could have imagined; for she looked upon him with a sort of awe, having heard of his fame from her kinswoman, and from kind old Mr. Petifer, who would rub his hands when their visitor was gone, and say that Philip had the makings of a Lord Chancellor in him if he could only be brought to exercise his great abilities.

Nobody knew how the recollection of the little fair country cousin, with her sweet smile and great inquiring eyes, grew upon that solitary bachelor; he had never guessed how strong a reality she had become to him, and how the lonely, purposeless life he led had fostered a yet undeveloped romance, of which she was the unconscious heroine, until one night, when on his way to the India House to meet his uncle, he had seen her and Oswald loitering together at a shop-window, and then, asking some questions of Mrs. Petifer, had heard news that smote sadly upon him and surprised him with a bitter remorse and disappointment. He was too old, too worldly, too idle, and selfish, and unbelieving to be worthy of wearing such a sweet, unsullied flower; and yet—and yet—— Ah, well! might she be happy! It was better as it had turned out, perhaps; and it was too late, and altogether too preposterous, for him to dream of love in a cottage; love in the Temple, amidst his dusty books, and pipes, and rickety furniture! Ha, ha! Why, the very sight of old Mrs. Plunkett, who

brought him his breakfast and was the laundress who "did for him," would suffice to frighten the rosy god, if ever his gilded wings could support him in a flight to the narrow passage leading to those dingy chambers. And so that night he went to the play, and, after yawning through a comedy, finished at Ralph Fairhoe's lodgings, where he lost or won, he wasn't sure which.

And now all that suppressed sentiment had been revived and had taken the form of a tender memory, leading him to a wish, as unselfish as the most ardent philanthropist could desire, to bring about her happiness, even at the cost of a long journey to the antipodes. What was his life worth, he argued, as he sat still smoking and thinking; it wouldn't be so very Quixotic, after all. There would be pleasure and excitement in the voyage, and he might stay in Sydney if that were all; they were getting civilised enough there to want law by that time, and he might actually be induced to make a fortune in a new country. He'd go over to Uncle Petifer's and talk the matter over, for his aunt was the only woman who had ever been much to him—had supplied his mother's place, indeed: that gentle mother whose portrait he now took from a drawer of his writing-table and looked at with dim eyes. Yes, he would go and talk it all over and make up his mind that night.

It was already late in the evening when he came to this conclusion, and he could hear the rain plashing in the court below, so that he hurriedly threw a cloak over his shoulders, took his hat, and went out at once;

but he had no sooner closed his outer-room door than he heard a swift and stealthy step upon the stair.

"Straight up and knock, an' I dessay you'll find him in," said the voice of the "laundress" from the steps leading to the subterranean wherein she dwelt.

He was conscious of the approach of a man as he stood aside upon the landing; but it was too dark to see, in that blind entry, when the clerk's hutch was shut. His visitor must have had a catlike power of eye, however; for before he reached him he stopped, on the top stair but one.

"You're the gentleman I want to see," he said; "and, if you'll come out, I'll give you my message in the street."

Mr. Ravel put out his hand and took hold of the man's arm. "What is your business?" he asked.

"I come from Marion Rooke," replied the other. "You may know her name. She is waiting for you at a house round yonder, by the river; and she has something to say of one who is dear to her."

Ravel had unlocked his door again, and now lighted his lamp with the aid of a phosphorus-box. The messenger still stood with his hat in his hand, and resting with a careless grace against the doorway.

He was a lithe, active, dark-skinned youth, with black, snaky, sidelocks, and such peculiar glittering, staring, unmoved eyes, that the barrister looked at him again, quickly and curiously.

"Do you know what I am wanted for?" he asked.

"Do you remember Barbara Waine?" returned the other.

Ravel started, and the stranger came up to him where he stood at the table and looked him in the eyes, much to his astonishment. Very few people could have returned that serpent-like look unmoved; and even the barrister coloured, self-possessed as he was, wondering what this intense scrutiny meant.

"Well," he said, at length, as the singular youth slowly raised his forefinger and pointed it at him.

"I see you know her. More than that, you love her, as I do, as any man might. Look here," he continued, taking out and opening a formidable clasp-knife. "This for the man who'd do her ill, if I have life and strength to kill. There's a gipsy rhyme for you, master. You know who I mean when I say that I would have his best blood if I thought——. But there's enough of patter. You'll come now to Marion and hear the story from her."

"What is your name, and who are you?" said Ravel.

"I'm Rory Lee, so they tell me; but that matters little. I'm what you folk call a gipsy, and that matters much. Don't keep the light in for me, master, I can see in the dark;" and, to prove his words, he sprang lightly down the stairs and waited in the hall, whence he led the way out into the street.

"You know where and why she has gone away, then?" said the barrister, surprised, in spite of himself, and a little alarmed at the fierce glances that shone in the gipsy's face whenever he spoke of Oswald.

"I think I know most of it; and, it may be, more than you do," he returned; "but I want to learn more,

and Marian Rooke nor none of us can find that out yet. You are to help us."

"What is it you wish to know?"

"Whether they are married."

"No, certainly not—at least, I should say not," replied the barrister, cautiously; "but let me see this Miss Rooke, the woman you speak of, and I shall have more information to guide me. You say you know Barbara Waine well?"

"Ay, and her father, too; none better, except, perhaps, Marion and her brother Reuben."

A sudden thought seemed to strike Mr. Ravel; he stopped in the street and put his hand on his companion's shoulder. "Look you here," he said; "she must be brought back again. Would this Marion Rooke go out across seas to fetch her, think you?"

"N—no, I don't think that," said the youth, with a sudden grin that showed all his ivory teeth; "she's about to marry, is Mistress Rooke—to marry one of your people, too, more shame be to her. She thinks I know naught of it, but I do, and she would scarce go now. This is nigh the street where we've to go. Yes; yonder's the house. I'll stay here and wait for you in case I'm wanted. Marion is inside." And before Ravel could stop him he had walked swiftly away and entered a little quiet tavern leading down an alley from Deerfoot-lane towards Thames-street.

Poor Mrs. Petifer was sitting in one of her easy-chairs, quite overcome with some sudden grief, and her worthy husband hung over her full of fussy solicitude, and with such a look of sorrow upon his well-

cut, gentlemanly old face, as it was quite painful to see.

Standing by the window and looking out into the street stood Marion Rooke, pale and more worn in those few days during which she had been absent from Grundon than she would have been by a year's hard work at her market-stall.

"Oh! please, sir, master will be so glad you're come," said the trim servant-girl who opened the door to Mr. Ravel; "he can't do nothing with poor missis, she do take on that dreadful, all along of a person as is in the parlour, as have brought some bad news for certain."

The girl's opinion was borne out by the conduct of Mr. Petifer, who welcomed his nephew with a great clapping of his hands. "Now we shall see our way. Thank you, Philip; thank you, my dear fellow. We want your Lord Chancellor's head to tell us what to do; though, poor dear little thing, I do pray from my soul that he hasn't done the wrong thing by her. No, no; damn him!—I beg your pardon, my dear—I mean confound him; if I thought he'd deceived her, I'd go out with him myself, on my soul, I almost would; but, bless my soul, I'm really quite incoherent. My dear boy, will you take anything after your walk?" So the old fellow rattled on, in a perplexed way, looking very piteously at his nephew, and holding his wife's hand in his own.

Mrs. Petifer got up presently and shook hands with her nephew. "My dear Philip," she said, "I am getting quite an old, old woman, or even what I have

heard to-night would not have shaken me so much. You remember my poor little cousin, Barbara Waine? You know the little fair-faced, blue-eyed thing who used to sit so demurely over there in the corner by the window when you talked to her about books and country life, and who used to think you such an awful personage?"

Remember her! What a heartache attested it as he listened!

"Well, my dear, you knew that she was engaged to young Oswald Fairhoe; to the gentleman on whose estate she lived. Her father was his steward, you know; and related to him by marriage, too, I assure you. There was no disparity of birth, Philip; Silas Waine was my own cousin, and your uncle will tell you that our family was as good as any Fairhoe or Bullpoint of them all. The only degradation Silas was ever subject to was when he consented to work out an old debt by taking service with Oswald's grandfather. But I'm wandering. You must know that directly my kinsman heard of this engagement—and, oh! Philip, I'm afraid I winked at it, and never told the father of the girl or the mother of the boy, and let them think they were deceiving me—when her father heard of it, I say, he took her away, rather than be subject to my lady of Fairhoe's pride, who thought a princess the only fitting mate for her son, and she a butcher's great-granddaughter! Now, both of them are on the way to Australia; and I hear that the young man came up to London too late to stop them—even if he could have stopped Silas, who is

both flint and fire in his temper. And, oh! oh, my dear boy!——" she became quite hysterical here, and fairly broke down.

"I know all this, my dear aunt," said the barrister: "pray compose yourself, and sit down."

"He knows everything," said Mr. Petifer to himself, approvingly. "Why the devil—I beg your pardon, my dear; I meant the dickens—he isn't Lord Chancellor, I can't make out."

"If I don't mistake, Madam," said Philip, walking to the window and speaking to Marion, who continued to look into the street, "you have brought some news, to understand which you think I can help you. Is it so?"

"Ah! that's it!" murmured the old gentleman. "Isn't it wonderful the way the legal mind comes to the very marrow of a thing; the—the—you know—the ve—ry pith of the matter, eh?"

"My dear, pray do be quiet," said Mrs. Petifer, who had considerably recovered.

"My dear, I beg your pardon. Very rude, on my soul—I mean, 'pon my honour—to talk to myself; but to see how ready and self-possessed these fellows are, you know!"

If he could only have guessed how that depressed gentleman was filled with some strange foreboding as he looked into Marion's face, his kind old heart would have felt more pity than admiration for him.

"What can I do for you?" he said presently. "I understand that you wish to seek my advice or my assistance, which I should like better still."

"I need not ask you whether you will help us; I can see it in your face," she returned; "and I can do no more than I have done without somebody to direct me."

"What, are you a gipsy, too?" he replied, half laughing in spite of his deep depression. "Your messenger said he could read something which he fancied my looks betrayed. I wish I could purchase such an art; it would be invaluable to me in my business sometimes."

"It is an art that you have learnt already," said Marion, "and you need no gipsy to teach it you. The boy who came to fetch you here has played the fortune-teller in his time, but it needs no fortune-teller to read the face when once the heart shines in it."

"Well, never mind that," he said, coldly; "this will scarcely help us to the end we have in view—that of Miss Waine, and how I can serve her."

"She must come back, if there is any way of fetching her; but we must first know whether she is still Barbara Waine or Barbara Fairhoe, and none but she herself can tell us that, except her—her husband."

"What do you mean? Have you any proof that they are married?"

"No proof that you could show to make the law take account of them; nothing but the girl's own word, and——"

"Yes; what else?" he asked, as she paused and held down her head while she plucked at her apron.

"The baby!"

The room seemed to be suddenly falling away from

him, and he almost staggered to the window, against which he leaned until he could make some sound of words with his white lips.

"I had vowed to keep it secret until he should come to claim her as his lawful wife," the market-woman went on, her face working and her great dark eyes still glaring through the window. "I have walked London streets day and night for near a week only to find that her father has taken her away, and she has spoke no word of what has happened. Only this morning I learned—never mind how—that Oswald Fairhoe has been in town, too, with the same purpose, and that you stood his friend when he needed one; say, for Heaven's sake, if he spoke to you of this on that morning when you saw him last, and when he might have been carried back to his mother a corpse."

"Not a word," said the barrister gloomily; "not a syllable. If I had only known of this before, my own cursed delicacy would not have spared him; oh, damn him—damn him! he shall answer for this if I have power to make him!" and Mr. Ravel sank into a chair, leaning his head in his hands.

"Philip, my dear boy, Philip!" chimed in the old gentleman; "pray don't. Here we all are looking to you to help us; here, do have some port wine, it's '84, I assure you—date on the bottle, on my soul; look at it; regular beeswing, by George. You haven't dined, I'll wager. Look here, my love, he hasn't dined; do order him something; or, here! here's a cake to begin with, my dear fellow." And so Mr. Petifer, fussing and prattling, contrived not only to

force a great glass of port and a hunch of cake upon his nephew, but to make a very timely diversion.

The wine rallied him. "I came here to-night," he said, slowly, "with the intention of following Silas Waine and his daughter to Australia, if by any means I could induce them to return; but that plan is at an end, for the present at all events. We must try to discover whether they are really married; and that will be no easy task; for you say she has been nowhere but to London. Before we do anything else, however, I must see Oswald Fairhoe. He will go himself to fetch her, and all will yet be well."

His head sank upon his breast with a heavy sigh. "Oh! oh! why did I never know this before?" cried Mrs. Petifer, "why did I never know? Philip, Philip! you never told me—never whispered a word, even to your uncle!"

He sprang up, and, seeming to shake himself free of something that pressed heavily upon him, went up to his aunt and kissed her. "Nay, nay, aunty! we will keep our own counsel. What have I to do with such folly? There's my uncle can't understand a word of what we're saying, even now; and so it's a secret hardly worth keeping. How old is the child you spoke of?" he added, quickly turning to Marion.

"Well, four or five months, I should think," said the market-woman; "if it's alive, as I hope it is."

"Where is it, then? What has been done with it?"

"If I'm not deceived, it's under a tent, somewhere on Fairhoe land, where it should be, and amongst them

that will use it as kindly as they know how, for my sake."

"It may be changed or stolen," he said, quickly. "Does the uncle know of this? You know who I mean—Ralph Fairhoe. You have heard of him, of course; for I learn that you were a servant of the family some years ago; though, perhaps, not many years," he added, as he noted the clear, resolute face and shapely figure before him.

"I know him well, and he has tried to steal the child; but we were too many for him. You know him, too, sir, or I am much deceived."

"I have heard something of him," said the barrister, who, with a sudden and almost unconscious transition of manner, assumed quite his professional or Old-Bailey air, and a cross-examining tone. "And now, may I inquire why you think that I know him?"

"You are a visitor at his house, and first met Mr. Oswald there; I know that much, sir," said Marion, peering up at him with rather a puzzled look at his change of manner; whereat the old gentleman was in ecstasies, winking and rubbing his hands, as much as to say, "Now we shall have some of the Lord Chancellor business in our own front parlour."

"The devil you do!" laughed Ravel. "May I ask how?"

"I would rather not tell you," said Marion; "let it alone. I knew that three days ago; but it was only this morning that I learnt how you came to be with Master Oswald on that morning, and who it was that laid the plan for getting him safely off."

"Hum!" said the barrister, looking at her, with his chin in his hand; "I can't go on without you trust me. I'm in the habit of hearing more dangerous secrets than this, and I promise not to divulge it."

"I'll tell you, then. Did you notice the lad who came to fetch you here to-night? There are few men amongst his tribe who are sharper than Rory Lee."

"A fellow of no few resources evidently," replied the barrister, "and likely to hear some secrets and to find out how to use them in his way. He guessed one of mine, and I fancy he knows one at least of yours."

"Of mine? I've none to guess," said Marion; but as she spoke the crimson blood came into her face as she saw the barrister's half-mocking smile.

"Well, go on," he said. "We shall none of us have any long if we're not more careful of them."

"Do you know that Ralph Fairhoe's daughter has a maid, and that she keeps house while they are away?"

"Well, what then?"

"Rory is a rare fortune-teller. Many a time has he put on some of the women's clothes over his own, and gone out to gossip to any of the maids who would cross his palm with silver; and he soon found the way to bring down that French girl from the window that she might hear what was in store for her. Three days running he went up and down that street, and every day he cut the cards and told her some new wonder; but when he'd once set her tongue going she talked, and he listened. You may be sure he knew enough to learn more."

"By Jupiter!" said Ravel, thoughtfully. "If I could only go to Australia, and take Rory with me, we might both make our fortunes. But that can't be, I fear. Well, Mrs. Rooke, I must try to imitate my friend Rory's cunning; and I'll begin, this very night, with trying to find out what we want to know. But first we must go down to Fairhoe. When do you return?"

"To-night."

"Give me some address where I may meet you before I go to the house, so that I can then say I have seen the child. On the day after to-morrow, in the morning, I shall be at Grundon, then," he added, as she told him where she might be found. "And now for this plan. I wonder whether Filmey would be of any use. I don't think I could trust him, either, if he knew what I really wanted."

He had spoken to himself, but Marion looked up as she heard the name. "I wouldn't trust him," she said, "if I could help it."

"What! do you know him too? How did that come about?"

"If it's the man I mean, he has helped to do all this mischief, for he was in time to have stopped them, if he'd liked. 'Twas Ralph's planning that he went about the work, and he did his master's bidding. We saw him afterwards hanging about the docks and wharves eastward, and drew the secret out of him, close as he is."

"Drew Filmey? never! Surely, you are mistaken; even Rory couldn't do that, clever as he may be. You

are deceived, Mrs. Rooke," said the barrister, wondering within himself at the strange interest he was taking in these queer people, and amused at the silent amazement exhibited by Mr. and Mrs. Petifer, who sat almost spellbound, though the old lady's twinkling eyes showed that she had a great opinion of her own upon the subject of the gipsies.

"Oh! they're very clever, Philip, these gipsy folk," she said presently. "I don't consider you to be one of them, you know, Mistress Rooke, because you re not more than half-and-half at most; and then, for the matter of that, who can say what they are after poor Bamfylde Moore Carew, who was related to me on my mother's side. Oh! they're very clever, and I've heard some of 'em have a great knowledge of herbs. I wish you could have stayed a day or two longer, ma'am, for I hear you've quite a gift that way, like myself, and I should so have liked to show you my receipt for a white lotion for the skin, and some other things that are quite rare, I assure you."

"Thank you, ma'am. I will take the liberty of calling when I'm in London next time; and, maybe, I can give you an old-fashioned receipt or two; but mine are mostly for physic, and that is what the gipsies have most account of."

"Yes, yes; that's all very well," interrupted Ravel; "but nobody was ever known to draw old Filmey. It couldn't be done; there isn't such an impenetrable flint in all London as Filmey."

"Even flints can be dissolved, they say," said Marion, quietly.

"Yes, but not in rum, and that's Filmey's favourite liquor."

"I know it. Rory and I treated him to it more than once."

She looked at the barrister with so meaning an expression that he refrained from further questioning, but that queer gleam shone once more from under his half-closed eyelids. He knew as well as though Rory himself had told him that there was something beside rum in Filmey's glass, or that, as Rory himself would have said, his drink had been "dree'd," so that his speech might be unlocked.

The night had set in dark and wet, and the old clock in the sooty tower of St. Washpot the Less, close to Mr. Petifer's house, struck twelve before Philip Ravel was on his way back to the Temple. The streets were almost deserted, for the lights shone in great yellow patches upon the wet stones, so that there was little inducement to be abroad. He had drawn his streaming hat over his eyes and turned up the collar of his cloak, and, having thus left himself incapable of seeing in any direction except straight before him, stumbled against a man who was drawn up in the shadow of an archway watching the entrance to the court in which his chambers stood.

"What the devil are you standing there for, my good fellow?" he said, rubbing the arm which had come with the most force against this person's head, as it stood out from the gateway already mentioned, like some extra bit of wood carving; "who's to see you there, do you think?"

The man muttered something and drew back; but, before the barrister had put his key into the door, he was at his elbow.

"Oh! lookee here, please, guv'nor. Strike me lucky if it ain't you as I've been looking for, this four hours, an' it ain't none so pleasant a night to be out in neither. You're Mister Rayvel, you are, an' no mistake."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh! I've met you afore, sir—down in the Court there, sir;—the Bailey. I ain't likely to make no mistake. When a gentleman like you gets a poor fellow off, all along of a pal as goes an' swears false agin him, he ain't likely to forgit in a hurry."

He was a roughly-dressed fellow, and yet his garments were so incongruous that it would have been difficult to guess what was his calling. Over a pair of tight corduroy trousers, which displayed all the symmetry of a pair of muscular legs, he wore a long, dark cloth coat, a great deal too short in the wrists and too small every way to conceal a red velveteen waistcoat and a loosely-tied cotton neckerchief, one of the ends of which he held in his mouth. His battered hat was dirty white, rendered more obtrusive by a black band, and in his hand he carried a short stick or bludgeon, which looked more like an offensive weapon than one intended to protect its owner from injury or insult.

Philip Ravel measured him with his eye before he admitted him to the passage. "Now, what is it you want with me?" he said. "I think I remember you,

too; you were in the gang that robbed Aminidab of the case of gold watches."

"No, no, sir; don't say that, don't say that; I was swore against, you know, sir, and——"

"I know. Well, what is it you want with me now?"

"You know Shanky Sam, sir—Sam Jones 's his name; but Shankey Sam, sir, we calls him, becos of his legs; likewise the Stiff 'un, sir—Oh, don't you go for to say you don't know the Stiff 'un!"

"I neither know him nor care if he should be hanged to-morrow," said Ravel, angrily. "How dare you come and ask me if I know any of your gang? Get out at once, and go about your business."

"Oh! I beg yer pardon, guv'nor; I ask yer grace, Mister Rayvel. I do, sir; s' elp me goodness. Look 'ye here, sir; all I was to say was as Shankey—leastways Samuel Jones, sir—he's got into trouble, all through a mistake about a pony, sir; and he's sent to the Sessions through a witness not a turnin' up as was swore to an' expected. Well, sir, who should I think on but your honour; but, I says, if so be Samuel, I says, the gentleman as defended of me is to be perwailed on, I says; why, you're as safe as houses, I says; and Samuel he laughs, and says if I ain't no safer than houses when you're there, he says, why that ain't much. Well, I says, if only the cove I speak on can be brought up to the scratch, I'm blowed if he won't get you off, if there's a red rag in the Bailey as knows when to wag."

The fellow looked so dismayed at the unintentional lapse at the end of his remarks, that Ravel burst out

laughing. "No, no," he said, pushing his visitor gently to the door; "give my compliments to Mr. Samuel Jones, or Mr. Shankey, or Mr. Stiff'un, and say I can't take his case; I shall leave London to-morrow or next day, and may be busy for some time to come. Good-night!"

The man had dexterously shut the door behind him, however, and now stood straddling across it, but quite respectfully, with his hat in his hands behind him.

"I can't take 'no' for a answer," sir, he said. "Lookee here, we won't talk about the money, that's all right aforehand; but Shankey he's got hold o' some flimsy, as you'll be able to make something 'ansum' on whenever you like, something as concerns you too. You just come an' see him yourself, an' judge *for* yourself."

"I tell you I'm going out of town to-morrow night, and shall be away a day or two, perhaps."

"What matters! His case won't be on yet awhile; and I've reglar put life into Sam a tellin' him I'd get yer. What's more, I've got the matter as I spoke of at home now, locked up in my box. It ain't o' no use o' your lookin' at me. I'm desperate; and I don't mean to move off o' this here mat till we've come to terms. These is the terms:—I'll give up possession o' that there to you to-morrow night. It's fam'ly papers, that's what it is; and you can have it if you pass your word as you won't split on us, and that if it ain't o' no good to you you'll give it back, and if it *is* good to you you'll take Shankey's case; lor! it's only about a pony at Stratford, as there was a mistake

about the right owner. Now, come, is that square and fair?"

"Very well; but don't come here again. I will meet you some time to-morrow, and you can bring the papers with you, whatever they are."

"And you'll promise?"

"Yes; I promise either to return them without prejudice or to defend your friend."

"You will? S' elp you?"

"Pshaw! now go away. Out with you. Where am I to meet you to-morrow?"

"Well, let's see, guv'nor; say on London Bridge, at half after eight, third lamp right 'and side."

"That will do. Now clear out. Good-night!" said Ravel, yawning, as he watched the fellow slouch away. "I wonder if there are any more adventures waiting up stairs," he said to himself, as he turned the key, but his chambers were as still and dusty and solitary as ever, and he went to bed to dream feverishly of all that had, and of much that never could happen. Dreamed so feverishly, indeed, that it was late when he rose, and, after a bath, went out to lunch, that he might be prepared for the night's journey to Grundon by the late coach. This lunch and a visit to the bank, and a late dinner at a City tavern, wore away the day, which had been bright and fine, but still left him so much time upon his hands, that he felt quite dispirited when he once more went into the streets and found the evening wet and lowering.

"I've nothing but a cane in the shape of arms," he said, "and I don't much care if my friend should take

a fancy to pitch me into the river. Ah! there he is, crouching in the shadow of that recess just as he came out of the doorway last night. I wonder whether one of all the people passing over this bridge goes on so strange an errand as mine."

He stopped, and was looking over the parapet of the bridge, before the fellow recognised him; but in another minute he felt him gently touch his elbow.

"All right, guv'nor; keep well in the dark, for Gord's sake; I'm a bein' looked for, and, if so be I wants you, I hope you won't forget me. Quick!" he added, almost fiercely, "here's one on 'em a comin', and I'll be his death before I'm took here."

So saying, he slipped a packet into the barrister's hand, and, with a hasty glance backward, darted across the road and was lost in the shadows that fell upon the other side.

CHAPTER IV.

REAL AND SHAM.

WHATEVER may have been the bitterness with which the knowledge of Walter Fairhoe's discovery came upon Oswald and his mother, it was necessary to conceal it from a house full of visitors, and to hold Walter himself to secrecy as a point of honour.

Oswald himself might scarcely have insisted on the latter condition, but to Mrs. Fairhoe it was of the utmost importance. She and Lady Flakestone had already so far settled the preliminary inquiries and arrangements for an alliance between the heir of the house and Caroline Blamyre that no such intelligence could be thought of as that of the impoverishment of the estate.

It is very easy, indeed, to take the succeeding steps when one has once set off upon the path of meanness and duplicity. The proud lady, who had reproached herself for withholding poor little Barbara's letter, and for going down to the level of her own waiting-maid in watching and spying and listening for remarks here and there, could scarcely stop short now that the end was so near attainment, and the steward and his daughter were on the other side of the world. Beside,

who could tell? Nobody could be sure that the law would recognise the old squire's will—nobody had said that Walter Fairhoe's father would take possession in fulfilling this indispensable condition of residing on the property; and Walter himself—well, he might die before he became the possible heir; there were chances in favour of that, and she started to find herself almost hoping that they might become realities. With Oswald matters were different. He had one secret lying heavily upon him, beside which all others seemed insignificant, and in his weakness and cowardice he almost hoped that some accident would reveal it, and then he would go away from Fairhoe and leave his mother for a time in the faint hope that she would so long to see his face again as to accept all that he had done, but dare not tell her. Until this party-giving and junketing was over, however, things must run their course; there could be nothing more terrible than to face a housefull of company, and, above all, to meet Lady Flakestone and her haughty daughter, when such a charge as he might have to meet and acknowledge had been whispered from ear to ear, and all that gay party looked at him as some curious monster who had contrived to cajole them into his society. It must wait, and so be determined by that chance in which he had so little trust, but to which he had long ago consigned himself. The new chapter in his life's romance had not yet opened; the page might be turned to-morrow, and then he—and others, too—must read it.

Meanwhile there were breakfast, and dinner, and

shooting, or riding in the morning, and music and acting charades in the evening—charades which had been introduced by one of the gentlemen, who, having done that service, was immediately wanted in London on private legislative business. There is no need to describe here what a blessing that new amusement was, and for that matter is still, in dull country places; and when the end of the long drawing-room at Fairhoe was curtained off for the stage, and the old closets and wardrobes were ransacked for costumes, everybody went in for the game with quite astonishing zest; though, to tell the truth, the palm of histrionic ability was given to Walter Fairhoe and Amina, who threw such soul into their acting as quite eclipsed everything off the real boards, and stimulated Miss Blamyre into such a curious regard both for the West Indian and the little adventuress as made Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe jealous and even Lady Flakestone uneasy; for the guardsman, when he had at last found tongue, had revealed to her Ladyship a sudden glimmering which had come upon his intellect to the effect that he had met Ralph and his charming daughter in some previous state of existence; and, as he was quite certain that they were, in a remote manner, connected with the loss of 200*l.* at *écarté*, they might be people whom to know was altogether beyond the endurance of the dowager.

Her wilful daughter, however, laughed at all her warnings, and persisted in petting Amina till it was a wonder that ill-regulated young person had not stabbed her with a silver fruit-knife, or some conve-

nient and lady-like weapon, as they sat at dessert. If looks could have killed, Caroline Blamyre would have been carried away from Fairhoe in a hearse; and she said this, and, after the manner even of such haughty women, enjoyed it with a kind of playfully savage leonine satisfaction.

With Walter it was different. She was no match for his quick shafts of wit, the poison of which was so artfully concealed that the arrow only rankled after it had been quivering a moment, and when it was too late to retort. The man sparkled like cut glass; there was no way to have him at a disadvantage, and she was never certain whether he intended a smile or a sneer. The truth was, he disliked her for her obvious torture of poor little defenceless Amina, and it delighted him to make those proud eyes droop, and to see the white, even teeth pressing that full, ruddy lip; and Amina was grateful to a champion who saw so much, and yet never by word or sign, save in this cunning fashion, revealed his knowledge. She was very miserable, this poor, wretched girl; and but for the sweet, plaintive soothing of good Mrs. Gabriel, she would have defied the proud beauty to her face before all that gallant company; and, after having done as much mischief as she might have effected so easily, would have flown, no one might know whither.

Mrs. Gabriel herself looked with sad, quiet eyes, as she sat at the well-appointed table, as though she saw that ugly skull of a secret suddenly growing instinctive with life and rearing itself upon a ghastly skeleton of trouble that should scare away the guests. What

would be the end of it all? and what of the poor little fair-haired girl now beyond the seas, far away from the child, which was, perhaps, perishing for want of a mother's care? Around that one deserted bantling so many and diverse interests were tending, that it might have been quite a noble, well-connected infant, and politely acquitted of any of the ordinary ills that flesh in babyhood is heir to.

"Do you really mean to go out for a pic-nic, then?" said Oswald to Miss Blamyre when the gentlemen entered the drawing-room after their wine.

"Most certainly; at least, not for a pic-nic, but for a gipsy party. You have heard it described by our friend Mars—a real—aw—gad!—gipsy party, with gipsy champagne, and gipsy lobster salad, and gipsy velvet mantles, and gipsy carriage cushions to sit on in case of damp in the grass, and all sorts of other rustic and half-savage contrivances. Oh! all the ladies have voted for it to a woman, and the carriages and horses are ordered to be ready at ten. Some will ride, others drive, and one party has actually had the hardihood to propose walking."

The breakfast-table was quite lively the next morning amidst the talk and preparations for the excursion which had been so appropriately suggested the night before. The gentlemen appeared in rustic costumes of the strictest elegance; the ladies had combined simplicity with extravagance in a manner of which the female toilet is alone susceptible; the horses, the carriages, the car, and a light double phaeton were at the door; the hampers were packed; the groom had

ridden over to Grundon for fruit, and oysters, and lobsters; the French cooks had been up since daylight to make pâtés; and baskets of choice drinks were slung beneath the vehicles.

The morning was brilliant as summer, but as summer that has borrowed some of autumn's dyes; the sky was bright, and only just less than cloudless; the air balmy, but with just a touch of freshness on it, like the crisp sparkle of champagne. Everybody was delighted, and when a turn in the country lane down which they rolled or cantered disclosed a long-wooded shelf or slope leading to a deeply-inclosed dell, most of the party joined in the proposal to alight and take a ramble amongst the trees upon the level velvet sward.

They had separated into parties of two and three, the riders and the carriage people mostly keeping together—Amina and Mrs. Fairhoe, Mrs. Gabriel and Lady Flakestone, a bevy of girls and the guardsman, who had driven the phaeton, and the remaining secretary of something.

Mr. Vivian Bullpoint hovered generally on the skirts of the party, as did Mr. Ralph Fairhoe. Miss Blamyre, with Walter and Oswald, as cavaliers, had ridden in a green and silver habit, so that she walked like an Amazon, her thick tresses of hair clubbed up behind beneath a plumed hat. She looked superb—queenly. The exercise had brought the rich colour to her cheeks; her magnificent figure was shown to advantage under the closely-fitting corsage; her drapery swept the ground like a regal train.

This party was the first to enter the little glade, where Miss Blamyre at once called attention to a column of white smoke rising above the scrubby trees from what appeared to be a clearing in the wood lower down.

"Here are the gipsies," she said, beckoning the rest to follow. "We will have a look at them, at all events."

The whole party straggled off, following her lead, and she was the first to enter, by a narrow path through the underwood to the open space. They were all upon it before they were aware of being so near, and there, sure enough, was the veritable gipsy encampment. The little, low, dirty tents, supported by half hoops, beneath which human beings crawled to sleep, and where brown, naked children were now rolling in the dirt; the tinker's skillet, where saucepans were being mended, and at which Reuben Rooke tap-tapped, unconscious of the gay spectators; the covered cart, where Jem the Bellows sat upon the shafts, smoking his short black pipe; the smouldering wood fire, with its pot of onion and cabbage broth simmering, suspended from an iron triangle; women making clothes pegs; boys grooming donkeys, or sitting idly in the sun; and, amidst the smoke and hammering and scolding clatter of the gipsy tongue, one group which attracted the attention of the intruding party in a moment.

A group, consisting of Marion Rooke, Rory Lee, Thirza of the same name, and a young woman, blacker and more sunburnt than the rest, who held a

baby to her breast. To her a tall, pale, well-dressed gentleman was speaking as though in earnest inquiry.

All the members of that sham gipsy party had stared at the reality of the camp; but nothing had so astonished them as this strange sight.

"Gracious Heaven! what can he be doing here?" said Vivian Bullpoint, who had succeeded in freezing his glass to his eye, and surveyed the scene from a little eminence made by the stump of a tree.

"What, indeed," replied Caroline Blamyre, who had caught his remark; "you really must see him, and invite him to come back with us, Oswald. He's in society, and I assure you he's one of the few tolerable men to be found there. You ought to know him; his name's Philip Ravel."

"And a very rising legal man indeed," chimed in Vivian.

Poor Oswald! as though he did not know the gentleman already.

CHAPTER V.

THE MESHES OF THE NET.

THERE was no need for Oswald to announce that he had already made the acquaintance of Mr. Philip Ravel, for that gentleman presently, catching sight of the party so suddenly disclosed in the gap between the hedges, came forward, and, including the entire company in a bow which was a triumph of self-possession, gave the infant to Marion Rooke, and joined the astonished circle with an altogether unmoved face.

"Now, only to think of seeing you here!" said Miss Blamyre. "We are living in an age of miracles, I declare; or else society is, quite unconsciously, situated on a volcano, which may blow us all up together any day. What has brought you to Fairhoe?"

"I must be ungallant enough to say that the invitation of the master of the house and the probability of participating in champagne, raised pie, and lobster salad were the principal inducements," replied the barrister, laughing and indicating the provision-baskets, which were now being laid on a green knoll at a little distance; "but I find that they will hence-

forth be only a secondary consideration. The fact is, my dear fellow," he added, turning to Oswald, who waited anxiously to greet him, and wondered what might be the news he brought, "I took the first opportunity of running down, but hadn't any notion of finding you with company. I needn't stay, you know, after to-night; and, in fact, I must be back in town by to-morrow or next day. I came down by the coach, and you haven't the least idea what a capital adventure I met with in the wood yonder, walking across the fields to get here. Surprised a whole colony of aboriginals, and found myself quite unexpectedly taking an interest in their family affairs, in which interesting position you discovered me, Miss Blamyre. There's something really worth living for in the country, I fancy, to a man blasé of town life, and I don't know that I shan't try the happiness spoken of by the poet, which consists in one's constant care being bounded by a few paternal acres, only in my case I should have to come into some other fellow's inheritance by purchase, and that might cross the charm, as my friends over there would say. Ah! Miss Amina Fairhoe! All the world seems to be trying a taste of primitive life, really."

Thus he rattled on as the members of the party disposed themselves round a sort of table, improvised by the ingenuity of the guardsman, of cushions, chaise-seats, and empty hampers. To Amina, who came up while he was talking, he bowed low, and with so respectful and serious a face that Miss Blamyre was filled with fresh wonder, and stood

silently biting her lips until most of the guests were seated, and Oswald stood beside her with an ottoman waiting till it pleased her to take her place.

The luncheon was scarcely so great a success as to justify the guardsman's opinion that "a pic-nic, egad! was—ahem!—the jolliest thing in the world;" but yet the party of which he was the centre, including the remaining secretarial diplomatist and three or four amiable giggling creatures who formed the fair freight of the phaeton, was merry enough, and the champagne, frothing and creaming over the long necks of the bottles before the servants could fill the glasses, set their tongues running in such silvery rippling talk as gradually broke the gathering gloom which threatened to overspread the rest of the company, just as the sharp firing of a salvo at sea will clear off a looming fog-bank, and dissipate it into the thinner air. It jarred a little upon Oswald's nerves to hear their light clamour and thoughtless laughter amidst a scene which he had, in his mock poetical way, sanctified by day-dreams and by the wandering fancies that had come to be associated with that dread care which was now sapping his very life. His lost love seemed to be crying to him from the woods, above the tripping talk and ringing laughter—not Barbara Waine, but his lost love—the sentiment which he had parted with, and for which he had, as he thought, found so little return. In the selfishness of his weak nature, he thought almost less of her whom that love had exiled, and perhaps destroyed, than of the sensibilities which had been wasted on a passion

that he dare not avow, but to which his life was pledged.

It is a dreadful thing to be compelled to record of an individual occupying at present the position of the hero of this story; but if Oswald Fairhoe had been stronger of will he might have passed either for an honourable gentleman or an atrocious scoundrel, so uncertain was the ballast which trimmed his mind and served instead of fixed and well-considered principles. The difference between the world's estimate of these two characters and what the characters really are is often only the difference between obstinacy and weakness. It depends on the strength of the man what manner of edifice will be reared upon the foundation of selfishness.

Oswald, sitting there, moody and irritable, resented the interference with his affairs which everybody seemed to think they had a right to exercise; and he at once began to cultivate a dogged resistance to the kind of authority that demanded of him what he had now no disposition to bestow—his confidence.

As he looked at Philip Ravel, who had contrived to join the smaller and the larger party together by a constant interchange of repartee, and so had amalgamated the dowdy and the lively sections of the company, he felt that he would have no course left to him but to refuse to enter into the subject of Barbara's return. It was a subject on which he had not yet decided for himself. Why should he accept the dictation of others, and so bring the shadow of a strange influence between himself and her? So he

sat and gnawed his heart, and waited for the message that Ravel might have brought him, or for the information that Marion Rooke had to give if she chose to speak to him there.

What would be the end of it all? Would these people force him to declare himself, and so become an exile from Fairhoe? He had a great mind to gratify them in that, at all events, and leave Walter Fairhoe to take possession of those lands that belonged to him by law, and become the head of the family in his room. He was tired of it, tired of life, angry with himself, and almost reproachful to the memory of the girl for whose sake he had inclosed himself in a net, the meshes of which seemed to be closing round him. By-the-by, where was Walter? His name had been mentioned over and over by the party where the laughter was loudest, and one or two of the ladies had expressed an opinion that he was a "disagreeable thing."

In truth, both he and Ralph had remained a little behind the party, and so had lost the sight of the gipsy camp.

The party dragged rather wearily on, until some of the true gipsies came from that encampment—sunburnt, ragged women, with infants at their back; half-naked, red-skinned children; lean, barefooted boys, and one or two blear-eyed hags, who begged for broken victuals, and collected the empty bottles, some of which had been set up on a stick as a cockshy by the elated guardsman, who threw at them with penny pieces, while the dark-skinned urchins scrambled for

such missing coppers as flew beyond a certain distance. Then one of them brought basket-ware to sell, and told fortunes at intervals; while a one-eyed vagabond sat on a post at a little distance and squeaked out wild tunes on a cracked fiddle. Nobody was particularly sorry when Miss Blamyre rose, and, intimating that she was tired of nature and savage life, proposed to go back to Fairhoe for a carpet dance.

She and her mother were to leave next day for Cheltenham, where they were to pass the winter; and, indeed, the party was likely to break up altogether, for Walter Fairhoe had received letters from Kingston speaking of the necessity of his presence and his father's illness. The diplomatist was wanted to help his country out of one of the innumerable scrapes into which she had been plunged by his absence; and even Ralph Fairhoe, apart from his daughter's anxiety to be gone, was looking forward to the winter campaign, that he might run away to one of those delightful Tom Tidler's grounds where gamesters pick up gold and silver, and so replenish the account, which had begun to run rather low at his bankers—low, that is to say, for a money-lender, who did bills at long dates, and took anything above 15 per cent.

It was while the carpet dance was in full whirl, and when Amina was playing a dashing waltz upon the piano, that Oswald came to the determination to which his previous thoughts had been tending.

He would satisfy none of those who had assumed

the right to question him; and as he had already abandoned his appointment to meet the market woman, he would escape all further interference, whether it came from her or from Philip Ravel, who stood in the window of the long drawing-room, waiting till the dance was finished that he might speak to him.

"I want a word with you, for I must be in London to-morrow, and shall, perhaps, start before you are astir," said the barrister, touching him on the arm as he passed to seek some ice for Miss Blamyre.

"One moment," replied Oswald, hurriedly, as he went to the sideboard. There was no possibility of escaping this much of inquiry, at all events; and he came back with so ill a grace that Ravel hesitated before he again addressed him.

"Well, now, what is the subject of which you wish to speak?" Oswald said, almost rudely. "I'm all ear, my dear fellow, for five minutes; after which I'm engaged for a cotillion," he added, a little less ungraciously.

Ravel's brows bent, and his thin lips came down angrily at the corners.

"There is but one subject between us which can be of any absolute importance," he said, "and you know it as well as I. You have made some arrangement for going or sending to Barbara Waine, I suppose; or have you waited for me to find a messenger, as I promised, in case you failed, to seek one who was trustworthy?"

Oswald's eyes flashed unsteadily. It was quite

evident that he had been drinking more than was good for him.

"You will pardon me, I trust," he said, "if I ask what is your particular right to question me in this matter?"

Ravel was surprised in spite of his habitual self-possession.

"What right?" he retorted; "the right of the confidence you made with me at my own chambers; more than that, the right of a distant relationship, or, at all events, of a family connection. If Miss Waine is Mrs. Petifer's cousin, I am Mr. Petifer's nephew, and have known her for years. For God's sake, Fairhoe, don't drive me to extremities in this matter! You showed me some part of your better nature when you were in London; let that speak now, and drive away this devil that has striven to subdue it to a course of which you will be ashamed. Think what must be the end to her and to yourself, and of the ruin that you have wrought unless she can be brought back at once. How I came to learn more than you yourself told me matters little. Enough that I have held in my arms to-day the helpless but living witness of what you owe to her. Tell me what you mean to do, that I may help you if I can, at any cost."

There was something so passionate in his appeal, a tone so urgent even in the low voice which uttered it, that Oswald gave way under it. His feelings gave way, but not his obstinate weakness; for there is something in the wrongful determination of a weak nature which is often more obdurate and relentless

than the will of a stronger character. "Leave it till to-morrow," he said, "or till I see you in London; if you knew how I am maddened now by all this gaiety, and what a load of grief I bear——"

"I know it," retorted Ravel, almost contemptuously; "but what has *she* to bear—exiled, almost friendless, deserted, separated from her child? What in all your smaller annoyances can compare with these? Besides," he added, with a slight motion of his hand towards Caroline Blamyre, who was standing in the centre of a group that had gathered round the fireplace, "to what are you not drifting? For Heaven's sake, awake in time, or there will be still deeper and, if possible, more irreparable mischief."

Oswald looked wildly towards the place which he had indicated, and then with a suppressed groan turned away his face. "To-morrow," he muttered, as he moved away.

"To-morrow may be too late," said the barrister, grasping his arm. "One thing I must know to-night, at all hazards, Oswald Fairhoe. Does she who is known only as Barbara Waine bear your name—is she your wife, or only——"

"To-morrow, or never, unless I choose," said Oswald, fiercely, breaking from him, and calling for the next dance in a voice so loud and in a tone so unnatural that the talking ceased suddenly, and Miss Blamyre looked up astonished.

Philip Ravel turned to the window and looked out upon the garden, where the moon shone in a broad silver flood upon the trim lawn.

"It will be too late to-morrow, and it is hopeless to-night, unless I choose to make a scene; and nothing will be gained by that," he said to himself.

At this moment he saw, or rather felt, with a quick, instinctive perception, that a figure was coming across the room to the window where he stood. "It is Amina Fairhoe," he muttered; "I will have no colloquy about him or his affairs with her;" and so he slipped away, and, taking his hat and a valise from a table where he had left them in the hall, set out to walk to Grundon, intending to return early next morning.

Still earlier next morning, however, Lady Flakestone and her daughter had left for Cheltenham, comfortably ensconced in the Bullpoint chariot, which had been sent over for their accommodation—had left, too, with the tacit understanding that "the engagement" between Caroline Blamyre and Oswald Fairhoe should be definitely settled on their return. The interval was regarded as a period of parole, involving an apparent but not a real freedom.

Oswald had left farewells and excuses for all his parting guests. He had ridden part of the journey as an escort to the ladies, and would remain in London for a few days, where he might possibly meet his cousin Walter, and would, if he had leisure, call on Mr. Philip Ravel.

All was vague, and the excuses for his absence were a little awkward; for, in truth, Mrs. Fairhoe herself had heard nothing of his intended journey till the last moment; but as she regarded her cherished project of

his alliance with the Flakestones as an accomplished fact, she let him depart with little question.

This, then, was the end of all his love and honour, and the cherished nobility of the family name. He had sunk into a miserable coward, and had fled to avoid the questioning which he had neither firmness to withstand nor the honesty to answer.

Not the end either. There could only be one end to it at that stage; but we need not follow him through the whole course of that dreadful journey which it took him only a few days to make. It is astonishing in how little a time a man can go to the Devil under the influence of dishonour and self-reproach and cowardice. Oswald took a very short way indeed: he went by brandy and water, and floated on with astonishing rapidity. In one week he had dropped from hell to hell; had begun with some of the few remaining gaming-houses in St. James's, but had fled from them on the chance of meeting Ravel or his cousin Ralph; had fled downwards, downwards to low betting-houses, third-rate billiard-rooms, beggarly taverns, at all of which he had been fleeced, until almost penniless. Shaking, with shattered nerves and a burning brain, he awoke one morning in a wretched room, the private parlour of a low public-house in some outlying neighbourhood, whither he had been taken he knew not how or by whom.

CHAPTER VI.

A LOWER DEEP.

It was in the dilapidated parlour of a fourth-rate public-house, in what was at that time the south-western suburb of London, that Oswald Fairhoe sat, stupid and spiritless, sodden with drink, and almost penniless.

Ralph Fairhoe was away on an excursion to one of the Tom Tidler's grounds before alluded to, but there was little difficulty in finding out all about Oswald through that silent and melancholy lieutenant of his uncle who sat in the office below the gorgeous chambers, waiting for the customers who wanted money, and perpetually eating from a paper bag under cover of his desk-lid. It is true that the unfortunate young man had sunk from wine and reverie to a coarser stimulus and drunken lethargy, and had, by the influence of the evil companions of his frequent debauches, declined from billiards and écarté to all fours and bagatelle; but there were representatives of all varieties of the great demi-rep class visiting one or other of Ralph's establishments. Some of these had helped Oswald downward on the road that he had set himself to travel; not that he needed much assistance,

for he went on with a dogged persistency, obstinately refusing to look either before or behind him—tramp, tramping down and down, till the tramp came to a totter, and still went on. There was no pleasure in such a journey. He had undertaken it with no expectation of pleasure, for, to do him justice, his nature revolted from the coarse and sordid debauchery of drugged drink and pothouse companions; but with these acquaintances he could go unquestioned and need never trouble himself to keep up such superficial customs of society as would have been demanded even by blacklegs and debauchees of another grade.

It was an evil time, too, for such as he. The manners of a bad period were just going out, and yet they had an influence on men who saw that the new order of things was coming. The reader who is old enough to remember five-and-thirty years ago will, if he take the trouble to compare that time with to-day, be surprised to note what vast changes have come over the face of society since that transition period. The bucks and bloods who emulated the doings of the former mohocks and aspired to make London streets a terror were just succumbing before the new police force; the three-bottle men were making efforts to sustain the good old custom of keeping possession of the dinner-table long after the ladies had retired to await their drunken lordships in the drawing-room; duelling had only just been rendered ridiculous by the operations of a couple of journeymen tailors at Wormwood-scrubbs; and the reputation of "the first gentleman in Europe" rather stank in the nostrils of the

people, who regarded the Royal wig with a strong sense of its smelling a little too decidedly of the curling irons. Beau Brummell might be dead, and Colonel Jack Hanger might have fled, but their influence had been too long felt in that sacred circle which surrounded the throne, and society itself sought some relief,—in the opening of a new dawn of morals and of literature,—from the vagaries of a Brummagem Charles II. and the revelations of the back stairs of Buckingham Palace.

It was not difficult, then, in those days for any man to reach to that lower deep into which Oswald Fairhoe had fallen. It is always too easy; but then the line of demarcation separating degrees of blackguardism was not very strongly marked, and so from the private hell not yet suppressed in St. James's Street, he drifted into the outer fringe of raffish tavern company, and played and drank indiscriminately: champagne and écarté to-night, "put" and gin-twist to-morrow.

And he was in hell, damned with a deep damnation, for he had still conscience enough to feel his degrading chain; and it cankered his flesh and burnt it to the bone. There is no worse hell than this; for just think what such a hell will be when the spirit of a man is unclothed of flesh, and stands, naked and shrinking, in the full sense of perverse wickedness and the remorse for unrepented sins! There will be no escaping that damnation, and not even drink will lull the unquenched fire, though it may make it burn fiercer in the time to come. Oswald had been trying this horrible remedy for remorse the night before; and

now it was high noon, and the pale watery light of a wet day gleamed through the dingy window and fell upon the sloppy table where he sat huddled in drunken sleep.

His bloodshot eyes were too weak to bear even that dim light when he first awoke, and yet it shone upon him with an accusing radiance which made him tremble. He could almost have called upon the house to fall in and hide him from it. You see his degradation had been swift; he had pursued evil with rapid strides, and a week or two had sufficed to bring him to that place, but had not quite sufficed to blunt his perception and to deaden his conscience. He tasted bitter remorse, and disliked the flavour of it; he felt the disgrace, and hated and loathed himself in a selfish sort of way—that is, less on account of what he ought to have done for the sake of the truth and loyalty that he owed to God and to the world than for the sake of what he had lost by being false to himself and to what was due to the character of Oswald Fairhoe.

His first reaction was to take up the bottle that stood upon the table and shake it with a trembling hand. It was empty; and even while he held it he felt that awful longing come upon him; not thirst, not anticipation of a pleasant draught of liquor, but the burning lust for drink that is the torture of the drunkard. He fought against it; thanks to the daylight that shone upon him and would not let him profane it yet. He fought against it, and crushed his hat down over his eyes that he might try to think. Then he began to wonder how long he had been at this place

—how long he had been in London; for he had lost count of time, and even forgotten what was the day of the week. He had spent a large sum of money, or had been robbed of it, which came to the same thing; and he could not draw from the London agents of the Grundon Bank without his mother's knowledge; there was a mutual confidence between them in money matters as far as the banking-account went, and she must know it if he drew a cheque. Should he borrow?

In the midst of speculating on this subject, he found his thoughts wandering to Philip Ravel and Ralph Fairhoe, either of whom might have seen him during the past few days—few days—it might have been weeks—could it have been months? or had time passed him by altogether, so that he would be an old man soon, led tottering to see his mother's grave, and to die in the ruin of what was once his home at Fairhoe? This thought, lying as it did in the direction of madness, held strong possession of him for a minute, until, after a vain effort to recall the date, he looked about him for a bell-pull that he might inquire of someone how long he had been there. He remembered a game at bagatelle at a shabby table, the green cloth of which was frayed and stained. He remembered a drunken brawl, in the midst of which he had lost all sense of time and place; and he knew no more, nor whether these things had occurred a day, or two days, or a week ago.

While he was feebly endeavouring to recall some event which might lead him to the discovery, he heard the door behind him open, and a voice called him.

"Cobbold!" said Oswald, as he staggered, almost breathless, to a seat.

"Richard Cobbold, Master Oswald, at your service," said the sergeant, grimly touching his hat in a military salute.

"What in the name of Heaven, brings you here?"

"I am here to take you home, sir; and I shall not leave the place until we go away together."

There was something so firm, so square, and determined, and yet so sorrowfully respectful, in the soldier's manner that Oswald tried to laugh, and, failing miserably, sat down and broke into a fit of crying. A man can cry pretty easily after such a paroxysm of drink and anger.

"Who sent you here?" he whimpered presently, with his face in his hands.

"No one sent me. I came here directly I heard from a casual acquaintance where you had gone to. I've known that you've been in London this three weeks; but I never expected to see your father's son in such a place as this, sir."

"Oh! Cobbold, Cobbold, you know how it is with me; my life's not worth having. I can't go home now and meet Mrs. Fairhoe."

"A man's no call to throw his life away because he hasn't done his duty: that don't seem to me to be logical, Master Oswald. As to my lady, she's in London, but she knows nothing of your whereabouts: leastway she didn't know this morning, for I met her by accident getting into her carriage at Mr. Bullpoint's door, and she asked me if I'd seen you."

"Thank God for that, at all events."

"Excuse me, sir; but we might as well start to-night by the coach, and then we can have a good three or four days at Fairhoe before my lady comes home. —Let me know where your luggage is, and I'll send a porter down for it while we get away to the booking-office. I shan't leave you, sir, till we are safe down home again; not if I carry you back in my arms—and that wouldn't be the first time by a good many, Master Oswald," added the honest fellow, looking ruefully at his old playmate.

Oswald made some show of opposition, which his companion received with such profound indifference that the poor wretch began to bewail his fate in not having a friend in the world, whereupon he burst into another fit of crying, in the midst of which the soldier drew his arm beneath his own, and so very firmly, but withal very tenderly, led him away to the coach office, whence, having left directions for the luggage to be forwarded next day, they reached Fairhoe that night; and Oswald, sorely broken and feeble, but not without some sense of peace and rest, leaned upon the strong, square shoulder on which he had so often sat as a child, and went for a stroll into the brown woods, where the last red leaves were whistling from the trees, and swept along in rustling eddies before they were blown into by-paths and hollows by the chill night air.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STIFFUN'S FEE.

As soon as Mr. Philip Ravel returned to town he prepared for the defence of the client, to whom he had promised his assistance, and whom, on the first interview, he recognised, notwithstanding his various aliases, as a notorious London thief and sharper, who had several times appeared in court to answer for his misdeeds. The career of Sam Jones, or Shanky Sam, or the Stiffun, has so little to do with the present story that it is unnecessary to say more than that even Mr. Ravel's eloquence and skilful treatment of witnesses failed to set him at liberty, although it probably shortened the period of his incarceration from five to two years. He might have got off altogether, since there was a degree of doubt as to the original owner of the pony which he was accused of stealing, which was in fact found in his possession; but while one of the jury had himself only just lost a bargain in the shape of a fast-trotting horse and trap in consequence of being called on to serve his country, another, who was a small-coal man, had been unable to arrive at the dignity of keeping any other animal than a donkey, and felt naturally indignant

that another should obtain for nothing what he had failed to acquire after years of economy and hard work. These considerations settled the Stiffun, who, however went cheerfully out of the dock and confided to a friend a message to his counsel that "no more couldn't be done for him than was done," and that he "was game," that was "one comfort," a sentiment which gave great satisfaction to his numerous acquaintances, who sidled and lounged about the court during the trial.

It was not till his return from Fairhoe, where he had called on the morning after the gipsy party only to hear of Oswald's departure to London, that Mr. Ravel had opened the packet which had been delivered to him by Shanky Sam's emissary.

On his return to his chambers from London Bridge he had locked the paper in a drawer of his writing-table that he might read it at his leisure when he came back from meeting Marion Rooke; and, indeed, there was only just time to catch the coach to Grundon that night, so that he had leisure to speculate on the contents of the document during his journey.

He repented of his want of interest in the matter when coming home; and, suddenly remembering that he had this business of Shanky Sam's to settle, he shut his inner door and took the packet out to read.

It was wrapped in a piece of stiff brown paper and was tied with a length of whipcord; and the writing, which occupied one side of a sheet of foolscap, was turned outward; but he had no sooner set eyes upon it than he gave a great cry, and almost staggered to the

window, that he might read it more carefully by the waning light. The document which had so strangely come again into his possession was no other than the letter which Oswald had written to his mother on the night before the duel; and here was the very information that the barrister had set himself to seek, written at a moment when few men would lie or conceal the truth.

"I must tell the truth now," it said, "and I should have told it before but that I felt too much fear of losing your love, and too little hope that you would ever regard me again, for crossing the dearest but the cruelest wish of your heart. The grave will cover fear; and I hope that it will abolish anger. Barbara Waine is my wife. I implore you, by the love you bore me, and by your own motherhood, to send for her, and bring her back to her child—to her child and mine. This has been my secret. She will tell you all. Mother, I never loved even her better or more truly than I have loved you always; and when I tell you this, your own heart should say that my love deserves the tardy justice that I ask for it. She is my wife and worthy to be your daughter."

"That settles it, then," sighed the barrister to himself as he sank into a chair, still holding the paper in his hand. "I can't go to Australia to bring back another man's wife. If he had really been shot, now, and she had been his widow"——and here he relapsed into a train of thought, from which he was only aroused by the sudden yellow glare of the lamp, which had been lighted in the court below.

It had fallen quite dark, and still he sat by the window, pondering what should be done. He would wait a day or two for Oswald to call on him, and then, if that failed him, write at once to Mrs. Fairhoe, asking for an interview. Let it rest first upon their honour, and, if they should refuse to recognise it, he would vindicate the right. At present he would keep the secret, even from his uncle Petifer.

A week went by, and, as he heard no tidings of Oswald, he wrote to Mrs. Fairhoe, asking permission to wait on her upon a matter of serious importance.

She had doubted his friendly intentions from the day when he appeared at the picnic and was so cordially recognised by Miss Blamyre. What had taken him among the gipsies, and how came he to be talking to Marion Rooke? Though her suspicions had taken no definite form, they made her uneasy, and his letter filled her with a vague alarm, lest he should have some interest in breaking off the match between Miss Blamyre and her son, and should use some exaggerated report of this unfortunate liaison for the purpose. She, too, had begun to suspect more than she had known at first, and, talking of this deep trouble to her sister, Mrs. Gabriel, that gentle soul, with many tears, and with wistful looks and prayers, had told her of Barbara Waine's child, and had besought that she might take it and cherish it.

It was the urgency with which the good woman pressed this last wish which ended in her leaving Fairhoe abruptly one morning; for her imperious

sister had declined to see her at breakfast, and on the previous evening had bidden her no longer to meddle with private family matters. So that even that gentle spirit was provoked, and took its revenge by going uncomplainingly away, to wait for some more hopeful and better time in which to make a fresh appeal.

Philip Ravel, acute as he was, had no notion of the uneasiness produced by his letter. The reply came in due course, saying that Mrs. Fairhoe, although she was at a loss to understand how he could be interested in any matter seriously affecting her, would give herself the pleasure of seeing him at Mr. Bullpoint's house in Bedford-square in a week from that date, at any hour he might appoint.

Still he had no tidings of Oswald, so that as he walked to Bedford-square he almost expected to overtake him going to the same destination, and was relieved to learn from the servant that Mrs. Fairhoe was alone.

His keenness was sufficient to lead him to the belief that the shortest of prefaces would be best, and he essayed only a word or two explaining first some of the circumstances which led to the writing of the paper that he held in his hand.

He watched her narrowly as he went on, and saw by the compressed lip and the flush upon her face, how deep was the shock to her pride when she learned, for the first time, of her son's encounter with Flasher Skidd. He spared her the details which would have involved an explanation of the cause of the dispute; as

much for the sake of Amina as for her own. Her son had been insulted, had given a blow, and had accepted a challenge. He had contrived to make an end of the affair which prevented the duel.

For this she thanked him with more of warmth than he had wished or expected: but when he came to the conversation between himself and Oswald after the meeting, all her warmth vanished, she rose, and haughtily declined to hear any conversation repeated which had reference to such a subject.

Her coolness, however, was tepid, when compared to the frigid calm with which Ravel regarded her.

"No doubt, madam, it is a subject which cannot claim your attention until you receive some further explanation," he said, while he scanned her in a way which had been found very trying by a score of witnesses under cross-examination. "But may I inquire if you know your son's hand-writing?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And this was written by him, I think you will acknowledge?" he asked again, showing her the back of the sheet of foolscap where it was addressed to herself.

"It is like his writing; but be good enough to tell me what has happened; did he give you that for me? where is he? give it me directly."

"I see you believe that he wrote it," he said, quietly, "and you shall have it presently. Nothing is amiss with him that I have heard. This paper was written the night before the proposed duel, and when he thought that he might never see you face to face again

in this world. It was addressed to you and left with me to deliver."

"How dare you open it, then? I thought you were a gentleman; Miss Caroline Blamyre told us so."

"I have to thank Miss Blamyre for her estimate of me, and I hope I shall never do it discredit," he replied, without the movement of an eyelash. "If you will be good enough to listen, I will tell you how I came by this, and how it was opened before it came into my hands. But read it first, and you will better understand why I have sought this interview."

She had some strange forebodings that the paper was fatal to her hopes, and it was terrible to read it under that searching glance, so that she felt relieved when he turned away and looked through the window. Presently he heard a rustling, and, looking round, saw that the sheet, with its envelope, had fluttered to the floor. She was standing gasping with bloodless lips, but with a flush on her proud face which reached to her temples, and showed a fiery contrast to the silver threads that here and there flecked her dark hair.

He was more moved than he thought possible, and almost repented of the cruel formality which her defiant manner had forced upon him. He would have gone to her assistance, for he thought she would fall or faint; but she motioned him away while she moistened her lips, preparing to speak.

"I refuse to believe it," she said, at last, in a voice so altered that he was shocked to hear it. "The

thing is a forgery, for some purpose of which I know nothing."

"Madam, let me recall you to yourself before you go farther," he said, coldly.

"I meant nothing affecting your honour," she replied, recovering her breath, and sitting down again.

"You tell me that this paper, or one like it, was left with you by my son, and that it was afterwards returned to you opened. Will you be good enough to explain?"

"I gave it back to Oswald Fairhoe when we parted at my own chambers, and urged him to destroy it. That he did not destroy it is certain, and I presume he was robbed of it on his way either to the coach office, or to Fairhoe. Ask him where he lost it, and I will furnish you with the rest of the information. The man who sent it to me is now in prison, and you can see him if you choose."

"Thank you," she retorted. "I prefer to take your word; but I still decline to believe what is written in this document, the original of which you never saw. I thought you were a barrister of some reputation; but there is no evidence here even for a woman who knows nothing of such matters as engage you constantly."

He saw how great an effort it cost her to stand thus at bay, and stooped to pick up the paper which lay at her feet.

"I should never have troubled you, madam, with so true and so evident a sorrow, had I not appealed in vain to your son to do justice to an innocent girl, a lady by

birth and education, whose misfortune it was to be the daughter of the steward of the estate of Fairhoe. I wished to give as little pain as might be in what I had to say. You force me to use language which no skill of mine can so convert as to make it unlike a threat. In the interest of that Barbara Waine, who was related to me by marriage, and for the sake of her child, I sought to bring your son to a better mind. In the cause of Barbara Fairhoe and the child, who is Oswald Fairhoe's heir, I shall use all the power the law will give me, unless you consent to do of your own will what I can demand."

There was no mistaking his determined face and stern, quiet tone. The languid, melancholy air of the man of fashion seemed to have petrified into a hard energy and force which she could never hope to withstand.

She trembled violently, and begged that he would hand her a glass of water from the sideboard.

"You still believe that this is genuine, then?" she began.

"You have never doubted it," he retorted.

"Well, have it as you will. At least I deny that it is genuine; and, if it be genuine, I deny that she is really his wife until I have proof of it. Of the child you mention, I never heard until three days ago, and I shall never cease to wish it dead; no, not if it were possible that it could be the heir of Fairhoe; but I will assume all this to be true until the proof is brought. You are esteemed a gentleman and a lawyer, and a man of the world; and therefore you must know

that on the truth or falsehood of this would hang the plans and hopes of years; you will excuse me, then, if I decline to subvert those plans and to forego those hopes until I have ample reasons."

"You have not far to go, madam; your son can furnish you with the proofs."

"I will send for him here at once; and then, when we have returned to Fairhoe, either with or without these proofs (I give you the benefit of the first supposition), I trust you will find leisure to join us there."

"I cannot say with pleasure, madam; but I will come."

"In the meantime (may I ask you to ring for the servant, if you please?) I must ask you, as a man of honour, to make no communication to Miss Blamyre, or, indeed, to any living soul. The honour of our family is not to be touched lightly, and I believe I may trust you not to tamper with it."

"I pledge myself not to mention this until I hear from you or see you again; but I entreat you not to delay, as the honour and lives of others depend upon it also."

He went out and down the stairs slowly, and, finding no footman in the hall, opened and shut the street-door for himself.

The woman-servant, who answered Mrs. Fairhoe's bell from an upper room, thought that the sound she heard just afterwards was caused by the fall of something which had been displaced by the clanging of that heavy lock and the concussion, that almost shook the

house; but going in, and failing to see her mistress seated anywhere in the room, she looked downward and saw that proud lady lying on the floor, with her face white and rigid, and her delicate hands grappling the carpet.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON BLUE WATER.

The ship Iphigenia, bound to Port Jackson, with thirty passengers on board, was slowly towed out of the Pool, and still Silas Waine sat upon the cumbered deck, clasping his daughter's hand, and looking far off beyond the vessel's prow, as though he could already discern the dawn of a new day in the land to which he was taking her.

Barbara had not stirred; but, with her head against her father's shoulder, watched the last flicker of the dying light upon the track by which they had come, and, as the feeble gleams shone and vanished—swallowed up in the black, seething water of the river—felt that her own hope had also gone down for ever.

She felt no keen pang, no unendurable anguish, for that was also a part of the past: but a dumb, abiding numbness of soul, a blank voiceless despair, came upon her, through which she felt she might live and move for years, as though death itself would pass her by—or, rather, as though he had already stayed to breathe upon her, and left her to wear away the weary days in one long, joyless winter, with all the springs of hope and love frozen into fatal stillness.

Through all that wretched time, after her child was born, and even after her return to Fairhoe and the journey to London, she had cherished the hope, which, though it had grown fainter and fainter, had not altogether abandoned her, that Oswald was constant and true, and would come, even at the last moment, to claim her as his own at any sacrifice. Now that trust had vanished, and she felt that he had discarded her.

She had never seen into his inmost heart; for, though the time of their childish lovemaking had been a vaguely-happy, sentimental time, it had passed like a dream, and now seemed to be but a tale that had been told in a summer twilight, with only the one dread reality that had succeeded it, to mark the grim earnestness of waking from all its undefined meanings into the colder dawn. Now that she had so awakened, she began to see his real nature and to distrust him utterly, while she was conscious, that her own character had changed by the force of newly-developed perceptions. Her life was suddenly emptied of its romance, and she feared that it had lost all its tenderness, and that the heart within her would turn to stone. In a few short days she seemed to have acquired the maturity of years—not a ripened but a crystallised maturity. The softness and colour had fled from her youth, and had left her a hard, cold woman, in place of a timid, confiding girl. This was what she thought; but it was not really so, although her girlish character had fallen away from her, and left her hopeless alike of the past and of

the future. She wondered most that she should feel so little; wondered and even grieved over that hardness which was, after all, but the numbness that often comes so mercifully after pain. She was almost terrified to think that the pain had not been keener and more lasting; and yet she welcomed the want of both, and hoped that she might relapse into a kind of rigid fatalism, waiting, but waiting patiently, for the end, and doing with a silent submission, destitute of real interest, the duties that lay on the road to death.

The thought of that poor, deserted baby and of her stifled love for it grew and grew upon her until the love itself escaped again and suffused her heart. The confession of all the past was on her lips; but, as she turned to seek her father's face, she saw that his thoughts, too, were busy; and, as the night came down upon the waste of waters upon which they were entering, remembrance lowered on his face and bore its record in his knitted brows and clenched right hand. She must find a more convenient season, at least, even if she could ever tell him that she was not a pining, love-sick girl, but a discarded wife, a cruel, fugitive mother. Terrible confession to any but an all perfect love and tenderness. Impossible and hopeless admission until some far off day-spring should rise upon her soul.

Her heart, which had begun to expand like a flower in a glimpse of genial warmth, shrank again before the tempest of that wrath to come which was prefigured in her father's gloomy pride, and though as he saw her turn towards him, his features relaxed

into a sorrowful smile, and his hand unclasped that he might caress her, she dared not say what had but a moment before shaped itself into words. Her heart was closed; but yet enwrapped in its inmost core, lay the seed of a new love and hope, in the yearning for that little life from which she was every hour parted still further by a widening waste of sea.

Among the passengers were mothers whose children gathered round their knees as they sat on deck in the fine weather, and upon these little ones Barbara would often cast wistful looks, until at length her natural shyness wore off and she made friends with some of them, which led at last to her going into the neat cabin, where her own white cot was placed within call of the rougher berth which her father occupied, and searching for one or two old story-books in the bottom of her deep sea-trunk.

There was one pale, delicate woman, who was going out with her child to join her husband at Port Jackson, where he had settled, in the more troubled time of the colony, three years before. For several days Barbara had kept aloof from the sight of the mother and her boy as they played together or fondled each other; but her heart had swelled almost to bursting as she watched them; and at length, as a sort of penalty on herself for her selfish envy, she went up and spoke to the little fellow, offering him a grand lunch of biscuit and jam, and so found herself with the chubby rogue upon her knee, telling him one of the stories which she fancied she had forgotten since her own childhood, so short a time ago, and yet removed to such an immeasurable

distance by the grief that had made her prematurely old.

The living children round her became to her the representatives of that other baby—perhaps dead, and if dead, oh! how much nearer to her—to look upon whose tiny face she would make all that weary voyage back to England, when once her father had settled in the new colony and she could summon strength to tell him all.

It was this determination, steadying her mind just as the briny air from the sea helped her weakened health, which took away some of the bitterness from grief, and made it more bearable, if even no less hopeless. There was much healing power, too, in those services to others which awoke the influences of human sympathy; and though she moved about with a soft, melancholy smile, and spoke but little to any but the children, the passengers, and especially the larger number, who were of the poorer sort and had their berths in the steerage, spoke gently in her presence, and looked up at her with a genuine feeling of respect as well as pity, as they noted her sweet, pale face, and those gentle blue eyes, in which the traces of tears, shed long ago, seemed yet to linger.

Soon there were more active calls upon her kindliness, for some of the little ones, and one or two of the grown people fell sick, and the provision made for such an emergency consisted of a miserably-supplied and long-disused medicine-chest, under the charge of a captain who, to the dismay of all on board, had

no sooner got well on the voyage than he devoted himself chiefly to the brandy-bottle; so that they could hear him sometimes on deck, in the night-watches, raving and cursing at the seamen, who found themselves short-handed in a ship without a reliable commander, and the only really efficient officer on board which was the second mate. Everyone who has been to sea in the past time—and not long past, either—when captains of merchant-vessels were responsible to nobody for the lives and safety of their men, will remember that only one or two medicines were considered necessary for any disorder likely to affect a sailor. The principal remedy in the captain's pharmacopœia was salts and senna, or Epsom salts only, mixed with a rough guess as to quantity, and administered from a tin mug; so it happened that nearly every other ingredient in the medicine-chest had either been irretrievably spoiled, had wasted away, or that the stoppers of the bottles had become hopeless fixtures; but there was a person on board, a middle-aged gentleman, always very well dressed and constantly attended by a quiet and observant valet, who had a few common drugs, and busied himself in making some medicines from the instructions in the captain's recipe-book. The best remedies, however, were the wine and beer and a good deal of the food which the better provided amongst them spared to the poorer; for between the dietary scale as exhibited in a neatly-printed form on the wall of the shipping-agents' office in London and the actual meals provided on board,

there was then even more difference than there is now; the ideal bearing about the same proportion to the actual as the instructions of the Poor-Law Board do to the orders of a board of guardians.

In her gentle ministrations to the children, Barbara was so naturally regarded as the almoner of these welcome gifts that she moved hither and thither in the vessel almost without question; but, wherever she went, she found that another hand was helping her in performing duties for which she was unfitted. A bed had to be moved and one of the elder boys carried upon deck, and a stronger arm had done both; a partition had to be knocked up to make a place for a mother beside her daughter, and a temporary division was effected with the aid of an old sail and two or three spars. The children wanted toys, and straightway, from all sorts of rubbish—of corks, and string, and bullets, and pieces of tobacco-pipe, and bits of bone, and old horn buttons, and pins, and cardboard—there came out a supply of table-chariots and teetotums, pigs, dogs, monkeys, and liliputian tombolas, such as did more in restoring the patients than half the medicine, even though a venerable white-haired Scotchman, with a ruddy wintry face and that dreamy blue eye which belongs to shepherds, had made some "grand drink" from a bundle of herbs which he had brought with him in a clean oilskin bag at the bottom of his great calfskin trunk.

Silas himself had helped at the concoction of this brew; for he was a herbalist of no little skill, and

there was something scriptural and godly in the talk of the old Scot which drew the rigid Calvinist to him, although their views differed rather considerably, especially on the subject of election, as we may see by-and-by.

But it was not Silas who had made the toys, nor had he won the children and their parents by the cheery words which they were all repeating one morning, when Barbara went her accustomed round of visiting in that small space. She ventured to inquire who had been there before her and left them all so merry; and learned that it was Mr. Paterson.

This was the name of the old gentleman who at that moment was just closing the Bible which he had been reading to a group of passengers, who sat mending socks round a great chest in the cabin; and she turned to him with a smile, to think that she had never guessed who was her quiet helper.

"Nae, nae, lassie," he said, shaking his head, "ye mauna speir at me; for it's no but my lad Andrie that comes in a while to minister to the folk that ken no how to mak' things comfortable. For ye ken Andrie's been at sea himsel', and is weel acquent wi' hoo things may be made muckle richt where anither body 'ud jest be clean daft wi' the sickness an' the cribbitness o' the place."

"It's very good of him," said Barbara.

"Oh! Andrie has nae thocht o' its bein' goodness; for, ye ken, if we do it not unto one o' these weans, we maun be ower far yet from the kingdom; and I mind by that that ye're one of the Lord's ain bairns

yersel', my bonny birdie, though it may be that ye are nae walkin' a'tegither in the brightness and fulness o' joy, and canna read the signs o' the Lord's high road o' sufferin' alang whilk he ca's ye to gang hame till himsel'."

Barbara's eyes filled with tears, she scarcely knew why; but there was something in the old man's words that seemed to make a throb in her heart—a throb of hope, a thrill of faith; but whether for this world or the world to come she knew not. We all divide this world so very carefully from the world to come that few of us remember that they are both one kingdom.

"Ye see, the laddie and mysel' are ganging ower the sea to a relateeve wha is the last o' the auld kin; an' Andrie, bein' so lang at sea, is a' aboot the ship hantlin' here an' there, an' helpin' ane time wi' the men and anither wi' the bairnies when ye're no here yersel', for he says he's no to come to interfere wi' your wark, but to mind his ain, which is jeest what ye're nae strong eneuch nor mebbe light-hairtit eneuch to pairfeckly undertake the noo. I wa'd like ye to read the Word here in my stead, too, lassie, at odd times, for I doubt it would mebbe come wi' more poower frae ye're lips than it gaes frae mine wi' the Scotteesh axent that the Southern ear's nae that fameeliar wi'. I wa'd ask ye to rest my een, the noo by just resumin' the third chapter o' Saint John's Gospel," he continued, as he placed the Bible in her hands, and rose to make room for her on the low seat near the great chest.

She could not refuse, for the women who were sewing there seconded the old man's request; and yet she felt the blood in her face and the very touch of the book, from which she had so long felt herself almost cut off in her hopeless sense of guilt and grief, sent a thrill through her as though she had laid her hand upon the ark, and, like Uzzah of old, might die for her presumption. She had to place a great constraint upon herself, and, with an inward cry for help and pity, sat down and began to read.

As she went on, not lifting her eyes from the book, but speaking the holy words softly and with reverence, she did not see that two or three fresh listeners had crept nearer, and amongst them her father, whose strongly-marked face relaxed as his grim mouth trembled into motion, and two tears, which might have been melted iron, fell upon his cheek.

Not till she had finished the chapter did one of these figures, standing up, throw a shadow between her and the space where the light came down through the glass lantern in the deck; then, looking up, she saw a tall man, dressed like a sailor, but in a rather different fashion, too, as though his sea dress had been modified by residence ashore. He was a strapping, long-limbed fellow, and towered half a foot above her father, even though he was stooping a little, with a sailor's habit of leaving a clear headway. He had taken off a Scotch cap, and his long, dark, crisply-curling hair hung round a weather-beaten face, of which the solemn expres-

sion scarcely moderated the bright humorous glance of a pair of deep blue eyes. There was a sense of freedom, ease, and strength about the whole man; and, though he was scarcely handsome, and his features would have been heavy but for the expression that seemed to play upon them, his appearance was suggestive of a heart-wholeness, while the very whiff of the salt breeze seemed to hang about his clustering locks and to have left its healthy savour on his bronzed cheeks. "Amen!" he said, solemnly, as she closed the book; and, as she looked up again, she found that the gay light had left his eyes, and that he was regarding her with a face so serious and yet so tender that she could not prevent her own glance from dwelling on him for a moment.

"It's rare to find ye here at this hour o' the day, Andrie," said the old man; "but as ye're here ye'll mebbe just say good morn to Miss Waine, for it's as gude a sicht to look on her, to my thinkin', when she's ministerin' the Word as when she concerns hersel' wi' the meat that perishes."

Andrew came forward and held out his hand, with a bow that might have done credit to superfine broadcloth and patent leather. "I hope Miss Waine won't think I'm intruding here," he said, with ever so little of the Scotch accent, just enough of the burr to show that he retained his proud nationality. "I thought she would have been later this morning, and came to look after some of her little patients."

"They seem to be more of your patients than

mine," she replied; "for your medicine has touched their bodies through their minds."

"And yours through their hearts," he said, quickly.

Of that inner revelation that gradually came to her she was conscious that she owed much to the new companionship to which both she and her father had so rapidly yielded in the solitude which came of their mutual avoidance of that one subject which engrossed the thoughts of both; but the companionship was one full of good influences for them. Old Donald Paterson was of the family of the true disciples, and added to his simplicity and honest loving faith something of the solemnity and authority of the seer. Perhaps the solitude of mountains and valleys, with only his sheep to tend, had done this for him, though much of his influence was owing to the expression of his noble old face and to the education which, as the son of a small farmer, he had obtained in his youth. More than all lay in the fact that he had burst the bonds of that narrow creed in which he had been instructed, and had, by an effort of Samson-like strength, broken the withes and ropes of small dogmas and human doctrines, and walked forth into the light and liberty of the gospel.

It would be difficult to explain in what way the gloomy belief of Silas Waine had been lightened by the quiet and unconscious ministry of the Scotch shepherd. It is in the very nature of such an influence to work unobserved and almost unsuspected, as the flowers grow and the genial harvests of the world ripen.

To Barbara it was at first a strange delight to sit silently listening to the talk of the two elders, or to the rarer and more vivid comments of Andrew, and she scarcely knew how her thoughts were changing, and how a reverent hope and fear began to take the place of dread and dark mistrust.

"The sea will have many dead to give up at the last," said Silas, on one occasion, when a darker sky foreboded a storm, and the billows began to rise as the day went down. "It is an awful reminder of judgment and of the words of the Psalmist, who would fain have hidden from the presence of God."

"I canna say it so likens itsel' to me," replied Donald, as he gazed at the horizon with that far-off look which was one of his peculiarities while he spoke on such subjects. "I wad rather regaird it as shewin' how, though men may flee away from the Lord into the ways o' all the warld, an' gang like rivers to an' fro in the airth till the end o' their lives, they maun just return to the bosom o' the Father—yea, even though some o' them should run through dark an' miry ways an' tak up wi' all sorts of evil and defilement, they canna rest till they just crawl wearily along an' seek to come back."

"Yes, the elect."

"I ken little aboot wha may be the elec, but, na doot, tho' the Lord na electit that the bonny streams that rin awa' from the sea suld be muckied an' muddied wi' impurity, he electit that they should all come back again tae the fountain o' their verra life and purity, and na' stay behint till they had cleansed their

sen, but gang ower and ower till they have their foulness a' destroyed and cast awa'."

In such wise did the old man talk;—his creed was a wide one.

During the voyage, until they reached the Cape, the eyes of the younger man would sometimes be so intently fixed upon Barbara, and he would regard her with a look at once so serious and so tender, that any other woman might have guessed his secret easily. Knowing what she knew of herself, however, such a thing as the possibility of a man's love being again offered her had never suggested itself for a moment, until one night—the last of the bright, calm evenings on deck—he was standing beside her watching the sun go down in a sea of glory, and began to speak in a low voice, which trembled a little as he went on.

At first she could scarcely trust her ears; but his meaning was unmistakable—he loved her, and before he told her so in as many words, her hand was on his lips, for she felt a paroxysm of fear and shame lest he should betray himself by set speech, when she knew what answer she could alone give to the trust and hope of such a noble heart.

"Oh! I implore you, say no more!" she cried, in an agony of entreaty. "Don't even think what you were going to say. It can never, never be. Oh! what can I do? What have I done?" and she looked wildly seaward, as though some unexpected horror had come that way.

Andrew's weather-beaten face could scarcely turn pale; but the muscles round his mouth began to work,

and his lips quivered as he looked at her—looked as though he would read her very soul.

"Do you mean that it is really impossible, and must be so?" he asked, presently, taking her hand gently between his own broad palms.

"It is and must be," she said, gathering strength from his respectful caress. "You can never know how much I grieve to have to tell you so; but you shall one day know the reason, and then you will not think hardly of me. All that you have said or would have said to me to-night belongs to the past."

His eye glowed more deeply, his glance became more searching; then, with a deep sigh, he gently released her hand, and, with a sudden flush of pain, simply said, "Forgive me!" and after lingering a moment, moved gently away.

She went to seek her father.

There were few more opportunities for such companionship; for stormy weather came on, and the passengers kept close; while great disorder prevailed on board, for the captain had drunk himself into a state alternating from furious obstinacy to maudlin weakness. The men who were hard-worked—for the vessel was short-handed—were almost mutinous, and only the seaman-like qualities of the second mate and the untiring good-humour and zeal of Andrew Paterson kept their muttered curses within bounds. The ship had rolled and pitched its way onward until they began to look forward to the passage of Bass's Strait in no very cheerful mood, since the crew were nearly worn out with work, and the passengers went

about, when they could manage to stand on deck, with pale, foreboding faces.

The weather, instead of improving, grew worse, until one afternoon the white clouds, which had been torn and ravelled like tattered sheets, were twisted out of space, and great slate-coloured billows of vapour broke over the whole sky, and were themselves tortured and riven by the raging wind, until their broken spaces were filled up by darker waves, that seemed as though they would drench out the light of heaven.

As the day wore away, the vessel rolled and heaved as though it could no longer make head, and had given up the trial, when a sudden gust, seeming to come from the very heart of the wind, which was howling and bellowing already, struck some part of the rigging, and brought it thundering down upon the deck.

Foremost to help clear it away was Andrew; and a few of the better sort of the crew followed him and contrived to set matters right, except that that part of the rigging was useless, and none could be set in such a gale without more help. The rest of the crew held aloof, moodily whispering to each other and looking out sulkily to sea. Two men were at the helm, and it required all their strength to work it.

It would have seemed impossible for the tempest to rage more fiercely, yet it increased. Andrew made his way as well as he could to the cabin where his father and Barbara were the centre of a terrified group of women and children, while Silas did his best, but with a gloomy brow, to talk to the men who felt all the bitter resentment that helpless landsmen must feel at

sea when there is danger in which they can be of no active service.

Only one of them was of any use, and his voice had been heard hoarsely urging the men at the pumps, for there was water in the hold, and he had headed a working-party to keep it from gaining.

This was the quiet gentleman who, with his attendant, had been a matter of no little question amongst the rest. Only Andrew knew that he was a convict who, having been sent to Port Jackson, had become a wealthy landowner; and by grace of Government, had been permitted, under the escort of an officer, to visit England, that he might hear some tidings of his relations before he died.

Almost before Andrew had joined the little group below, he, too, came plunging down, and touching the young man upon the shoulder, placed a pistol in his hand.

"We're lost in half an hour if we can't take to the boats," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "The captain's raving drunk, locked in his own cabin, and the infernal scoundrels have broken into the spirit closet and are fighting amongst themselves. We must get the good men together ready to lower the boats, and shoot down the others if they attempt to swamp us.

"No boat can live in this sea," said Andrew, composedly.

"Say you don't know," replied the other. "I ought to, for I've been in just such another, and with just such a mutinous lot of scoundrels, when I first came out here. You stay and explain to the people here

how to come on deck, and I'll go and get the men together; there won't be above a dozen at most."

"And the others; we can't leave them to drown?"

"Can't we. I think we can, and they deserve drowning if ever a set of rats did. Here it comes."

It did come. A tornado so fearful that the vessel, labouring and rolling before, seemed to stagger under it, and was almost engulphed. Barbara sprang to her feet, and came to Andrew, her father holding her.

"There is no hope for us," she said, looking at him, with a calm, white face.

"There is always hope," he answered, cheerily; "for we are in God's world, and wherever we go we can't get out of God's world, even though He should please to take us to the life to come. I trust to you and to my father to get all these poor people together, and to wait ready to make your way on deck when I call to you. We may have to take to the boats, and I must go now and see; but I will be back again. Fear nothing. Hope all things."

Another outburst of the wind, which boomed as though it had been forced from the clouds against the ship in solid form, with such resistless force it came to drive it into the sea. Another and another; and then a sudden, awful stillness, amidst which rose the voice of old Donald.

"O Lord, we know that the sea is thine, for thou didst make it, and canst haud it in the hollow of thine han', so that if thou shouldst will in thy good pleasure that we be swallowed up in the tempest, we shall a' be in the hollow of thy living han', too, and thou wilt

lead us to the rest and to the peace which canna be found but wi' thee—Amen."

The storm seemed to have stayed to gather up its strength and to take breath, for there came a dreadful rush and roar, as though all nature was upheaved, and the tidings of the end of all things had come out seaward on these dumb, awful sounds. Then when they all expected the sea to come pouring in upon them, the ship staggered, rolled heavily, and righted again, while a dreadful shock, followed by a creaking shiver, which seemed to loosen every bolt and beam, threw them from their feet.

Another minute, and Andrew appeared amongst them. "Quick, quick!" he said. "Men, bring the women up and follow me. Father, come beside me with a couple o' the bairnies, and let each man bring one."

There was that in his voice that gave them life and energy, and the men seized the screaming children, while the women prepared to follow to the deck. Barbara had snatched the child who had first attracted her from its cot, where it was sleeping through all the wild war of the elements, and, folding it in the skirt of her dress, followed her father. Old Donald was beside his son, his form erect, his eye clear, and full of faith and courage.

"It is our only chance, I think; for the ship has struck upon a reef, and, though the storm is over, she must part," said Andrew, amidst a stillness which was almost more terrible than the storm that had passed so suddenly away. "Better to be in an open boat all night than to stay by her. This way, all."

A party of four seamen stood by the davits of the largest boat, ready to lower her at the word of the first mate, who stood with a heavy bar of iron in his hand. The ship laboured awfully, edging further and further upon the reef on which she had driven, and the sea seethed like a cauldron. Ropes and running gear were ready, and, at a word, the boat was lowered away.

"Mr. Small, you'll go with the first party," said the first mate to his second in command, who stood by with the tackle.

Mr. Small looked sulky. "I'd rather you went, sir," he said, touching his cap.

"In with you, sir," replied his superior; "I stay till the last, if need be." And he went, the human freight of men, women, and children following, without one lost, though it was hard work to keep the boat clear of the hull of the vessel, which had begun to heel over.

When this boat had got away with four seamen and the second mate, the next was lowered more easily, for the storm still abated; and Andrew and the first mate went aside for a moment's consultation, after which they went down into the captain's cabin and brought him up with them, struggling in the madness of delirium. They would have forced him into the boat, and meant to hold him there until she was launched with a couple of sailors to tie him neck-and-heels, but, suddenly slipping out of his coat, he rushed down again into the cabin.

The ex-convict, who had been all this time standing at the third boat with his pistol in his hand, and with

an ugly look in his eye watching the fore part of the vessel where about half the men had settled down into hopeless intoxication, now came forward and pointing meaningly to the sky, where the stars had already begun to come out.

"There is no time to lose," he said; "she will last for hours yet, and the best chance for these rascals will be for us to meet with some chance of help by daylight to-morrow. Mr. Rashleigh, you will go with this boat," he added to the first mate.

There was such a sense of command in his voice that the officer bowed involuntarily. The fact is, the fellow had been the leader of a notorious London gang twenty years before, and was as cool and collected as even bad men with iron nerves can be in danger, though he was no longer a bad man, for success had softened him, and he was strictly honest, and even what the world would call a goodish man, now that he was convinced of the folly of being a sinner and a thief.

It was he who had collected the provisions, the wrappings, and the bottles of water for the boats, and he had done it with a celerity which could only have come by experience: in fact, it was said that he had quelled a mutiny on board the very convict-ship which carried him to Port Jackson, and that he had afterwards almost got away on a raft. But that is nothing to the purpose of the present narrative.

It would have been fatal to linger; for though the ship would not break up till morning, or it might be for all next day, the boats could not be preserved

amidst the wreck of her going to pieces: and so the first mate went away with the rest of the passengers, who, however, would not leave until the third boat was ready to be lowered for Andrew and his father, Silas Waine, and Barbara and the poor woman who had begged to go with them, since her little one still clung to Barbara's neck, and cried when its mother gently unclasped its arms that she might hold it to her bosom at the last, if the last should come.

"You had better have one of the men with you," said Mr. Rashleigh to Andrew, as he prepared to swing himself clear and drop to his place at the helm of the boat that now hung on only till he was ready.

"No, no; there are three of us here, and I'm sailor enough to manage her," replied the young man.

"Four of us, you mean; for I go with you," said the ex-convict.

"And I go with you, sir," said his attendant, obsequiously.

The other made a wry face.

Andrew had noted with some anxiety, however, that the boat was small and light, and feared that there would be some difficulty in keeping her head to the sea in case the wind should rise again. The ex-convict had seen this too, and had constructed a timber frame, which, when fastened to her sides by lashing, would so outrig her that she would ride over the waves more easily. This they rapidly fitted, and had made ready to start when it was found that there was only a single running rope to lower the two women.

In a moment Curtis, for so was the ex-convict named, plunged down to what had been his berth, and with incredible quickness, for he had to break in the door with his foot, hauled out a trunk and brought forth a life preserver—not one of those implements with the use of which he was formerly familiar, but a buoy for saving life at sea.

"Put this round the women," he shouted to Andrew, " and then reeve the rope under their arms, and swing them off gently. Let these two men go first, and hold on like the very dev—— I mean, like one o'clock: and we'll come last. Now, lower away!"

Away went the boat; and Silas and old Donald were in it almost as soon as it touched the water. The poor woman with her baby at her breast followed, and then the life-preserver was hauled up again, and Andrew was just about to fasten it round Barbara's waist, when he heard a yell, and, starting back, saw the captain lying on his back on the deck, where he had just been felled by a terrific left-hander from Curtis.

"Sneaking varmint!" said that worthy—he was just going to make a jump for the boat—"he's got sober with fright at last, and he'd have swamped us in another minute. Was watching all the time behind you there, a cowardly blackguard!"

"Quick! quick!" shouted Curtis as Andrew endeavoured to bring the wretched man to his senses, that he might take him off with them. "We shall be lost if we hold on here a minute longer, for she's heeling over more and more, and the sea is rising."

So Andrew dropped into the boat, and, leaving the

helm to Curtis, who had taken it as if by right, pulled out, with vigorous strokes, away from the seething water above the reef into the open deep, where their frail craft bore them away into the darkness to wait for a morning that might never dawn for them in this world.

Barbara had looked death in the face and had in a manner prepared for it, for, in one of the short intervals during which the storm had abated earlier in the day, she had written some last words of forgiveness and of entreaty; and now, when hope was at its ebb, she committed them to the sea, whence they might come with the solemn meaning of a voice from the dead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PATERNITY OF THE PARISH.

Stucco houses in the new-fangled style of architecture had grown by degrees around the old market-place of Grundon, so that its High-street was but of secondary importance, and the thoroughfare devoted to the gentility of the town lay at some distance from that commercial centre.

The old-fashioned ruddy brick buildings which had once sufficed for the doctor, the lawyer, and the parson, were superseded by the innovations of their more pretentious neighbours. It is true that Mr. Sharp, the lawyer, and the good Vicar remained staunch to the low ceilings, the queer, narrow small-paned windows, the deep doorways, and the irregular but spacious rooms. But the doctor (by whom is meant, of course, Dr. Sweetning), having married his niece to a chemist in London, and so removed the only obstacle to his own rejuvenescence, had himself formed an alliance with the only surviving daughter of a wealthy patient, and, with a rich chestnut wig and a set of teeth, removed to one of these new abodes, which had been fitted from top to bottom with modern furniture.

It was thought by many of the inhabitants of Grundon that this proceeding was an indication of the doctor's retiring from his professional duties, but in this they were altogether mistaken. His practice was too lucrative to be given up so readily, and the dark brougham, with its pocket containing the silver sherry flask and the sandwiches, rolled from door to door as before, except that it stopped only at the entrances to the better sort of houses. For the inferior half of his patients Dr. Sweetning took a partner, a middle-aged looking young gentleman from London, who, having no particular expectations beyond the fifteen hundred pounds which he paid for a share of Sweetning's profits, was glad to become the representative of that gentleman amongst the small shopkeepers and poorer patients.

He was glad, also, to obtain a bed-room and sitting-room in the doctor's old house in the High-street, which had been let to Mr. Quintle, a retired grocer, from Ipswich, who, having as a bachelor amassed quite a genteel property, had given up all thoughts of matrimony, and had set up housekeeping with the aid of a maiden sister, to whose gentle spirit the relinquishment of the possibility of changing her condition had not fully commended itself, although she professed the greatest alarm at the proposition of receiving the new lodger.

Of course, Mr. Quintle was a very busy man, because he had nothing in the world to do and followed no device to fill up his time; had no favourite pursuits except cribbage and short whist; had given up the

flute out of regard for his chest, and gardening in consequence of a doubt as to his back. He was generally dressed with that sort of neatness which is only redeemed from severity by an eccentric adoption of some incongruous garment or the combination of two styles of attire that have no relation to each other; such as a stiff muslin neckcloth with a seal-skin waistcoat, or a high-shouldered, snuff-brown, swallow-tail coat with a large, loose, flapping shirt collar. As a rule, however, primness was his ruling attribute, which showed itself from the clump soles of his cloth boots to the curled, perky brim of his smoothly-brushed hat.

It is scarcely surprising that the lean figure and rabbit-like face of Mr. Quintle had not been long seen in Grundon before he was distinguished by the attentions of those local magnates who governed the parochial affairs. No vestry or board of guardians could have been considered complete while such a man remained in the obscurity which was implied by his not being a member of their councils. The sagacity that was implied by the self-satisfied smirk with which he received information or questioned the opinions of other people, and the subtlety and depth which he exhibited by never committing himself to any definite opinion of his own, alike pointed him out as a legislator who, had he chosen, might have filled some high office in the State. The shopkeepers who composed the majority of the board waited on him in a body to offer him admission behind what they called the bulwark of British liberty, meaning a seat at the

long table in the great room of the new workhouse at Grundon, where they, as patriotic and enlightened representatives of the town, carried on "that local self-government which," &c., brag and slip-slop *ad infinitum*, in a mixture of the regular parochial proportions.

In fact, the "authorities" who held control over the paupers and the rates were more rampant just at this time in consequence of Grundon having achieved the object of its ambition by the completion of a new building, which was partly an extension of the old poorhouse, where certain infirm old people and a few sickly children lived once in monotonous dotage. Since the alteration, which was called "an amendment of the poor laws," the able-bodied as well as the infirm, the sick as well as the aged, had become residents; for labourers were no longer sent out to work in the fields by the parish, and the old, rickety building, with its narrow, fusty, low-ceilinged rooms, all huddled together under one roof, and leading to a dusty waste of ground, which by virtue of a few drooping shrubs was called a garden, and opened by a back gate to the churchyard, had been found too inconvenient even for the bestowal of paupers.

This original edifice being hidden by a new building of pale brick, exhibiting to the fullest extent the parochial or hopeless order of architecture, was devoted mostly to the sick, who, being thus put out of sight, and not a few of them out of mind, wore away the remnants of their lives in the close and almost rayless wards, where all the light that shone came

from the back windows looking on the weediest and rankest side of the churchyard; so that they may be said to have had death constantly in view.

The new wards consisted of great, bare apartments, which, although they were neither well warmed, nor well ventilated, but retained always the sickly atmosphere of weak gruel and dirty worsted peculiar to such places, were pitiless in the staring blankness of their yellow plaster walls, unrelieved by a single picture or even a nail on which to hang one. Yellow walls, pale blue check, and rusty grey shoddy—there was no variety from these in Grundon workhouse; and even in the great room called the nursery, where infant paupers wallowed before a decent fire on a great rug, or slept in cots and beds, under the inspection of Mrs. Purley, there was very little change, except that the blue check was on a smaller scale and the shoddy had not yet become visible.

Mrs. Purley was the embodiment of at least half a dozen monthly nurses, and had ushered into the world some scores of little paupers, who, on their first introduction to it and to her, had asked with wistful wondering eyes why they had been brought there to increase a population which was far too large already.

As Mrs. Purley could never satisfactorily answer this question herself, and generally discouraged inquisitiveness, she only replied by a sigh which partook of the nature of a grumble, and would sometimes sit all day with one or other of the poor, forlorn little beings on her lap, administering nourishment from a flat

bottle, patting a red back, or vainly endeavouring to soothe that disconsolate wailing which seemed combined of a regret for an almost forgotten past with a dread of a yet unrevealed future.

Mrs. Purley was a remnant of the old institution, and it would have been well if there had been a few more such; for she was as kind to the infants under her care as the poor laws would let her be, and much kinder than Mrs. Scraper, who took charge of the more advanced children of from five to twelve years old. Mrs. Scraper was an importation from a London penitentiary, which she had left on the introduction of the new discipline intended to ameliorate the punishments of the offenders. She was a woman of experience, and her testimonials from two visiting magistrates were so good that the Grundon board engaged her immediately. Unlike Mrs. Purley—whose fat, pursey face was not without some kindliness, and who had grown to resemble a double pincushion, in the lower half of which, represented by her short lap, a large-headed child or two had been deposited—Mrs. Scraper was lean and angular, and possessed a vinegary aspect, by no means mitigated by the near approximation of a broad, blunt nose, and a long pointed chin, nor by the suspicious glances of an angry but watery eye. It was, perhaps, a blessing for the children that they begun life under circumstances that left them a chance of surviving the period of infancy; but had they known what awaited them they might have deemed it but a questionable advantage; for, in addition to the other powers

granted to Mrs. Scraper, she had full control over the juvenile dietary, and it was distinctly whispered in "the house" that she "farmed the lot, at so much a head, and did pretty tidy out on it."

At all events, she was on very good terms with the master and matron, Mr. and Mrs. Naggerly, who, having no children of their own, and not having cultivated the organ of philoprogenitiveness, regarded the youthful inhabitants of Grundon workhouse as in some sort their natural enemies; not that any of the paupers were created for any other purpose than to be a burden and a disgrace, and to provide a means of comfortable subsistence to those who had charge of their degraded lives;—but, whilst there might be some possible reason for tolerating the existence of an aged pauper, there could be none but absurd excuses for the being of a child who could claim no paternity but that of the parish.

The only really comfortable apartments in the great block of brick and mortar were the board-room (where leather-bottomed chairs, a long, green-baize covered table, a thick carpet, and a good fire, were frequently the adjuncts to a substantial lunch of cold meats and brown sherry) and the private dwelling-rooms of the master and matron, and Mrs. Scraper; and it was on a morning when lunch, and sherry, and fire, and general warmth and plenty were most desirable, that the members of the board met to consider what should be done under what one of them, a retired auctioneer, characterised as "most unprecedented, most injurious," and he would "not say most scandalous, but certainly

most inexcusable, and most unendurable, and most uncalled-for circumstances."

The event which produced this burst of oratory was no less than the resignation of the doctor of Grundon workhouse, our old friend Mr. Letsom, who, having found that the annual stipend of eighteen pounds had scarcely covered the expenses of the drugs supplied during a very sickly season, when he felt it his duty to be in daily attendance, had written very plainly to that effect, and had intimated his desire to make way for some wealthier or less conscientious practitioner.

The board meeting was summoned hastily to consider what was the meaning of this astounding impertinence on the part of so poor a man as Mr. Letsom had appeared to be. Had it been Dr. Sweetning, now, who had actually laughed in the face of a hurried deputation which waited on him to inquire if his professional engagements would permit him to undertake the office for a week or two—had it been Dr. Sweetning, they might have been prepared for such an insult; for when he smiled, and in so doing exhibited the very gold plates of his false teeth, he at the same time informed them that his patients would never for a moment permit his visits if they knew that he had just come from the pauper sick-wards. This was a very proper reason, and showed how just an estimate he held of the parish poor. But for that Letsom, a fellow who actually went every day through the wards, and asked the old pauper nurses awkward questions, and turned down the bedclothes to see that the sheets were clean, and even went so far as to

break a window that wouldn't open to let in more air, and ordered wine and beef-tea, as though he thought the board meant to spend the ratepayers' money on such things when there was always a remnant of excellent gruel in the workhouse copper;—for such a person as this to resign, to discharge himself of them, as it were—as the principal cheesemonger, and one of the warmest men in Grundon, said, it was "anuff to make one wish as they had him himself in the house, so as they might see what he was made of, and how much beef-tea he'd get out of them." Here the worthy member helped himself to a glass of brown sherry, and with a deprecatory smile, intended to check the general laughter, the chairman called upon the members present to proceed to business.

It was quite impossible to remonstrate with Mr. Letsom, or even to attempt to bring him by any means to a sense of the enormity of which he had been guilty; for he had left Grundon for London three days before, and his practice, such as it was, had been advertised for sale, and left temporarily under the charge of Mr. Swiffle, whose term of service expired in a month from that date, when Mr. Letsom's tenancy of the house also terminated. It was reasonable to conclude, therefore, that there would be no opportunity for his reconsidering his resignation, which was the plan proposed by one of the less pompous members of the board.

In truth, Mr. Letsom had been heard of, or at least, remembered, where his talents would be certain of some appreciation, and had received the offer of an

appointment at one of the London hospitals, where a lucrative private practice was sure to follow.

Ten minutes after he had read the letter, inviting him to accept this appointment, he was standing behind Marion Rooke's stall in the old market-place, and urging her to leave it and all its painful associations, that they might begin their new life together. She was forced to hush his impatient appeal, but she could not so easily check the tide of hope and yet the cross current of fear that swelled and agitated her heart.

There was but one consideration which could be of force enough to keep her at Grundon, and that was the safety and the care of Barbara's child. There could be no doubt that when Silas Waine once learned that his daughter was Oswald Fairhoe's wife, he would hasten back and claim for her the right that no other relation would have given. In any case, nothing could be done to hasten that event until some message should come to say where father or daughter could be found. Her anxiety was much deeper on account of the infant which she had in some sort undertaken to cherish; for she had neither seen nor heard of it for more than two months. The last brown leaves had fallen in Fairhoe woods, and had been sodden into pulp by the winter snows which had lain for days smooth and white upon the meadows, and stood in tortured drifts against the low hillsides, and she trembled for that young life, exposed perhaps to all the hardships of a gipsy camp in such bitter weather.

Just before Christmas the people had been there on Fairhoe land while she was away in London; but the new steward had come to fill Silas Waine's place—a young man, who, besides being the son of a duke's bailiff, had all the interest that the head of the house of Bullpoint could command with Mrs. Fairhoe. Had he relied on the character which could have been furnished by the companions in whose society he had formerly lived, he might have been less successful; for those who knew him best spoke of him as one of the most artful, and yet one of the boldest, of the young men about Leyburne, where he lived as a keeper in the Duke's preserves, a trainer in the stables, and a general professor of the arts which are most in request in a large country establishment.

Oswald was in London when the bargain was concluded, and by the time he had gone back to Fairhoe with Richard Cobbold, James Harrick had taken possession of Silas Waine's house by sending his trunks, and guns, and other personal effects, although he had not yet arrived himself.

Few people knew when he took personal possession; but one of the first things he did was to warn off the gipsies from the land about Fairhoe. It was of no avail that the farmers told him how the tribe had some sort of prescriptive right, in acknowledgment of which no fowl was taken from a hen-roost nor an egg from a nest on all the estate; he said that he had his mistress's warrant for it, and he warned all those who encouraged the vagabonds that they should be held responsible. Indeed, his tone became so high that one

or two of the older men asked him bluntly whether he had suddenly come to be master of Fairhoe; upon which, suppressing an ugly leer and stifling the passionate retort which rose to his lips, he took refuge in that sudden deference which was his chief artifice, and which he had found so efficacious in higher company that he could not doubt its effects on these "dunderheaded clods," as he was pleased to call them in soliloquy. Then he gave the rein to his powerful blood horse and rode off without hearing the muttered comments which compared him to the stern but just Calvinist who had preceded him as steward of Fairhoe.

On the first visit that the gipsies paid the village after these threats and warnings he rode into their camp and repeated to them the orders that he had already given to the tenants. The women heard him first, and answered him with shrill laughter. After this, they called the men; and they grinned and nodded, but said nothing. Two of their number went up to "the house," afterwards, to learn the truth and to remonstrate; but Oswald could not be seen, and Mrs. Fairhoe refused to interfere. Everything was left to Harrick. The tents remained all that night, and in the morning the new steward appeared again, with a couple of constables at his back, and told them that he had made arrangements for driving them off if they did not go that day, and that he would prosecute any one of them, or send half their tribe to gaol if they lurked and sneaked about the woods twenty-four hours longer. This was said to the

women; for not a man came forward, though dusky faces and shining eyes looked at him from amidst the bare brushwood, as he rode away, as though they would not easily forget him should they meet again.

That night the tents were struck; and that night, too, the fowl-house at Harrick's cottage was cleared, and the sow, with all her farrow, lay dead in her stye; and next day his blood horse fell sick, and the heavy rain came through his stable loft and the roof of the little barn where he kept his hay and seed.

Marion was in London, whither she had gone to see Mr. Ravel, when all this happened, but she heard it from Reuben, and afterwards from Rory Lee, both of whom came from Grundon to tell her that they had lost sight of the woman who had the baby in charge, and that she had gone on with some of the tribe towards the north.

Christmas had passed (such a Christmas as it was at Fairhoe would have blighted any roof-tree or chilled any hearth), and yet the woman did not come, though Rory had gone in search of her. He came back, after some time, expecting to learn that she had been to Marion before him, for she had left the people who travelled northward with a messenger, which Rory thought must have been Reuben; she had then been seen to turn again towards Fairhoe. After waiting a week or two he went again to search for her, fearing that she might have fallen into trouble away from any of their people who could give him intelligence.

He had not returned, though it was now the second

week in February, and the low lands were ankle deep in water, while the rain fell wearily over field and road. It was this that made Marion anxious to delay even the happiness that was awaiting her; but Letsom would not hear of it, and satisfied her with the promise that, if the child should be brought back to Grundon, they would take it with them to London when they returned after their marriage—would take it and have it brought up under their own care, if she willed it so.

There was no answering such a plan by fresh objections, and, indeed, few men would have proposed to meet the difficulty in this way; and so, leaving a message for Rory to tell him where he would find her in London, and strictly enjoining the woman at whose house she lodged to detain the gipsy nurse if she should make her appearance, and to send for her immediately, she packed up her modest wardrobe and went away by the coach, where she sat beside her future husband.

The wedding was one of the plainest and quietest affairs that ever came off, even in a dingy old city church up a court, where a small-coal man and a printer's boy were the only congregation that day; and a friend of Mr. Letsom and the pew-opener the only witnesses. They all three—that is to say, Mr. and Mrs. Letsom and the friend—repaired to an hotel to lunch afterwards, where they were joined by the friend's sister, who, having missed the church, had failed to officiate as bridesmaid, according to the original programme, and went into hysterics in con-

sequence, from which she was only restored by the aid of East India madeira and ratafia biscuits.

Marion was very happy, and began the duties of her new home—which was on the upper floor of an old-fashioned pleasant house near the hospital—with a quiet joy and sober spirit very pleasant to see.

Her only uneasiness was about the child, and the thought that it might be dead, and the fancy that she might yet have to bear the reproaches of its bereaved mother, to whom her heart yet yearned with all its old truth, was the one cloud over her married life. At last she could bear it no longer, but went to Fairhoe, only to hear that no inquiries had been made for her at her old lodgings. She could not visit the market so soon after her departure, or she might have heard how a woman, but without a child, had been there asking for her; how the people had told her that Mistress Rooke was now Mistress Letsom, and how she had then moved away as if with a sudden impulse and had not returned.

On the very morning after this event had happened, however, a strange accident occurred to Mr. Quintle. He had risen at his usual hour of seven o'clock, had lighted his inch of wax candle, and having shaved with the aid of the little pewter shaving-pot which invariably stood at his door by a quarter past, had dressed slowly; so that by the time he had buttoned on a pair of drab gaiters under his short trousers and above his cloth boots, the day had begun to break and a streak of sunlight was gilding the windows of the opposite houses. This sight had been so uncommon for the

past fortnight that Mr. Quintle began to hum a tune in appreciation of the kind intentions of the elements in his favour on one of the very mornings which he had devoted to that constitutional walk before breakfast with which he indulged himself three times a week.

He paused for a moment in the passage to consider whether he should take his umbrella, but in a burst of generous confidence abandoned the idea; and, still humming and with his head erect, opened the street-door.

It was a mercy that his elevation of spirit had sought no greater expression than was attainable by humming, or that his voice was but small and reedy on the most vociferous occasion, for he had scarcely placed his advanced foot on the top step when he heard a wailing cry in the very doorway.

It sounded like the cat, and he was about to call the small servant who ministered to their modest household to take the animal in and see that the milk jug was out of harm's way, when the crying was repeated, and he saw that it proceeded from a stained and ragged woollen shawl, which lay inside a small basket tied with a long osier twig to the scraper.

To say that Mr. Quintle was surprised would but feebly convey his astonishment as he removed a corner of the covering and saw a fair, blue-eyed baby, whose lungs, to judge from the noise which they were instrumental in producing, had suffered little from the keen morning air.

What was he to do? Here was a calamity against which the practised wisdom of the most sagacious of

mankind could scarcely avail. It is true that he had heard of Solomon once suggesting the slaughter of an infant in order to decide a difficulty; but he did not perfectly recollect that the proposal had been carried out. Besides, as he wasn't exactly Solomon, the law might require awkward explanations about the killing even of a stray baby, unless it had been first taken to the workhouse.

At this moment Miss Matilda, or, as she preferred to be called, Matty Quintle, came down, rather cold and a little nipped in the temper, from her morning ablutions.

"Law, Stephen! why in the name of goodness are you standing at the door? it sends a draught right through the house!" she said, a little snappishly; but seeing that her brother stood still and appeared to be regarding, with an awful expression of face, something which, to judge from his features, must have been a dead body at least, she softly advanced, gently conscious that Mr. Pestell had also come down-stairs and was close behind her.

Judge of her shame and blushing confusion when she saw the corner of that ragged shawl whisked aside by a chubby little fist and heard the repetition of that wailing cry. She was very much shocked; but she had as much charity for the moment as Pharaoh's daughter had when she heard the cry of the infant Moses by the rushes on the bank of old Nile, and, stooping down, she untied the osier withe and carried in the ark of willow wherein the babe lay.

Mr. Quintle followed her into the breakfast-room,

where he looked at her, open-mouthed, much as she looked at him.

"What did you bring it in for?" he asked at last, with a gasp.

"Why, we can't leave it there, poor little thing!" she replied, with a glance to see what effect her words had on Mr. Pestell.

"Certainly not," said that gentleman. "I should wait a little while and give it some milk, and then send it to the workhouse."

"Ah, to be sure," said Quintle, seeing a way out of the difficulty. "Yes, ha! ha!"

He laughed a little hysterically, for he caught his sister's eye upon him, and was also conscious of a queer look from their lodger. What could they mean? Was their glance one of pity or suspicion? What was it?

"Well?" he said, presently, looking from one to the other.

"Oh, brother!" said Miss Matty.

"Well?" he ejaculated again.

"To-day, too, of all days in the year."

"What day—what do you mean?"

"Va—a—a—len—ti—i—ine's day!" screamed his sister, and immediately went off into laughing, mixed with crying hysterics, from which Mr. Pestell had to restore her, while Mr. Quintle held the baby.

CHAPTER X.

MR. QUINTLE'S VALENTINE.

To be embarrassed with a strange baby is a misfortune to which few single gentlemen would be found equal; and Mr. Quintle waited with some anxiety until his sister chose to be recovered from the agitation into which she had been surprised by the discovery of the unwelcome little stranger.

When the infant, who had not ceased to give vocal evidence of his presence, had been consigned to the care of the domestic, with strict injunctions that she was not to appear at the windows, and instructions to devote half the morning's supply of milk to the refreshment of the unexpected inmate, Miss Quintle was in a condition to superintend the breakfast-table, and her brother had sufficiently regained his composure to discuss the best means of conveying the foundling to the workhouse, where he could at once obtain an order for its admission. There was no indication, either in the shape of address or letter, placed in the basket, to give any clue to the parents of the infant; and, though the clothes that it wore, as well as those which were folded under it in a soft square bundle, were of fine material, and made with neat delicate needlework,

they bore no mark by which the parents might be traced.

When Mr. Quintle entered the board-room, three of the parochial magnates had already assembled, for a meeting had been summoned for business no less important than that of considering how they could best meet the difficulty which had arisen from the resignation of Mr. Letsom. Their chairman, the ex-auctioneer, was standing with his back to the fire; while his two coadjutors were pressing on each side in the endeavour to participate in some of the rays of that warmth in which their more pompous and overbearing companion basked, with the delightful consciousness of a grateful heat in the calves of his legs, which was gradually extending to the back buttons of the coat whose tails were gracefully supported on each arm.

The clerk to the board—a deferential person, who had formerly filled the situation of parcels' manager at the coach-office—was placing pens and paper on the green-baize covered table. The relieving officer—a retired bailiff's follower, who, having slipped down on a grating in the attempt to capture an active debtor, had been forced to submit to amputation, and now sought to avenge himself on society for a wooden leg—was waiting outside, seated on a narrow shelf in the lobby. The business was only deferred until another member of the board should arrive and "form a quorum"—a phrase which each of the gentlemen present used in succession, and with no little unction, as combining in itself the true official flavour, with a smack of law and the classics.

"I don't, upon my soul, see what the inmates can want with a reg'lar medical man. What on earth is there to make any of 'em ill, I should like to know?" said a pale, melancholy-looking person, who pursued the trade of a saddler, and had that morning called on Doctor Sweetning with his little bill, that he might incidentally inquire whether he would run any risk in having his hair cut in such cold weather.

"Oh! illness is half of it fancy, or over eatin', or else not eatin' enough," retorted a plethoric butterman, who, having run over from an early attendance at market, was thinking whether he could decently order up a snack of cold meat before the proper lunch time.

"No doubt of it," replied the chairman, with a sly giggle, as he stooped down to rub the calves of his legs, and to hitch the scorched half of his trowsers a little away from the fire. "Not a doubt of it; and, as we've taken care that there shall be quite enough, and yet not too much to eat here, it must be fancy."

"There's three dead in the sick ward this morning, sir," said the clerk, looking up from a half sheet of foolscap, whereon he was copying the minutes of the last meeting.

"Tut, tut, tut!" said the saddler. "What can they want to go and die like that for? We shall hear something of it, if we don't mind; and, perhaps, it's a good job that we all pull together without no disagreements, or else the Poor-Law Board might be down upon us. I really *have* heard that they interfere sometimes."

"Don't you believe no such a thing, Fidler," retorted the butterman, warmly. "What should they come a interferin' for, I'd like to know? Why, ain't we, as the guardians of the poor, the best judges of what's right and proper? No, no! the country ain't come to that pass yet awhile, thank Gawd! It's a'most unconstitootional even to think of it. Why, where'd be our self-government an' all that, if the institootions of the country was to be overturned for the sake of a lot o' damned paupers, as——?"

"Hush! there's somebody knocking," said the auctioneer, stopping the wrathful flow of the butterman's oratory.

"It's the relievin' officer, as says he wants to see the board," said the clerk, who had replied to the knock; and the thud of that functionary's wooden leg, as he stumped into the doorway, verified the report.

"Lookee here, gentlemen, this here's what I call a rum go," he said, with an amazed and dissatisfied expression of face, as he twirled his shabby oilskin hat in his hands and looked from one to the other.

The guardians made an effort to look dignified, and partially succeeded.

"What is the communication you desire to make to us, Grabbett?" said the chairman.

"Communication? Well, I don't know as I've got any," said Grabbett, rubbing his head; "but the thing is, is fondlings to be took in without with yer leave or by yer leave, as if they was——"

"Fondlings! there ain't no fondlings in Grundon," said the butterman; "and there's no such thing been

heard of since our board's been a sittin' at this house."

"We can't admit fondlings here," said the saddler, gloomily; "leastway, not without their parents. The law provides for taking 'em in *with*, I believe; more shame for it."

"Pray let us inquire into this, gentlemen," said the auctioneer, with a gesture of authority. "Where did you find this *found*ling?" he added, with a slightly supercilious emphasis on the first syllable, as asserting his superior knowledge.

"Not at all, yer honour; not a bit on it; it ain't a reg'lar dropped child, this ain't, but a fondling o' Mr. Quintle's as he sends here by a servant gal, all reg'lar huddled up in a basket, like a suckin' pig; as she says, 'This here's to be took in agin my master comes presently to swear to it;' and I say, 'No! For what if there was a habeas corpus to know for why we was a detainin' the prisoner,' I says, 'agin the law?'"

The confusion of the relieving officer's faculties having been rendered more hopeless by the fumes of a private dram of raw rum which he had taken to counteract the cold of the stone corridor, there is no knowing to what length he might have continued his remarks, but that he was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Quintle himself, who came in with such suddenness and yet with so much caution that Grabbett, who used his wooden leg as a kind of lever, or support, by which to steady himself against the door, fell back into his arms, so that both men disappeared from the wondering eyes of the guardians; and it was full

twenty seconds before the clerk could summon sufficient presence of mind to take off the relieving officer, who, impressed with a conviction that he was the subject of some deeply-laid scheme of assault, clung to his supposed antagonist with desperate courage, and called loudly for help.

It was not till Mr. Quintle had removed the traces of this unexpected encounter, and the clerk had been told that he might withdraw for half an hour, and had been called back in consequence of the lucky thought of the butterman, who said, "he might as well ask the matron to send up a bit o' something an' a drop o' sherry for Mr. Quintle, who had had a little accident," that the gentlemen could listen to any explanation. But as the clerk retired and the lunch arrived, with extra glasses and plates for the two other guardians, who happened to overtake it on the way, Mr. Quintle unfolded his strange intelligence, accompanied by some facetious remarks on the part of the chairman, and glances which were intended to be full of delicate humour from the other members of the board.

By the time that they had emptied the decanter, however, they began to be impressed with the solemn nature of the business they had met to discuss, and, having jointly and severally expressed their convictions that vigilant inquiries should be made in the neighbourhood, and a bill offering five shillings reward placed on the workhouse gate (a decision which was afterwards reversed on the score of needless extravagance), ordered up the clerk, whose faint smile was checked by a portentous frown from every member of

the board, and bade him call before them the young woman with the infant.

"Oh! you brought this infant here this morning, did you?" inquired the chairman, in a judicial voice, as the maid-of-all-work in the Quintle household came in, with the baby on one arm and the basket in her other hand.

"It's not your own child, is it?" asked the butterman, not to be outdone.

"In fact, you never saw it before until this morning, eh?" said the saddler in his turn.

"You don't know the mother of it, my girl, do you?" insinuated one of the new arrivals, leaning back, with his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"Nor the father of it, eh? Come now," ejaculated the other, who shaded his eyes to look at her, and nodded his head in a warning manner.

To all these questions the poor girl, quite red and flustered, could only protest her ignorance, and would have recounted the whole circumstances of her being called up to attend to Miss Quintle, who had gone off into hysterics in Mr. Pestell's arms, but that Mrs. Purley, who had been sent for from the nursery, came panting in with such a peculiar gait that she looked like a sentimental seal or walrus in a blue serge morning-gown and a mob-cap. Her arms were so instinctively held out at sight of a baby, however, that the discomfited maid-of-all-work immediately relinquished her charge and was dismissed by the last speaker, who, looking forward to the remote possibility of his being

called to the commission of the peace, told her that she might go for that time, but that she had better take care not to be brought before him again.

"Poor little creature," said Mrs. Purley, as she looked at the unconscious bundle in her arms, "it's born to trouble, like the rest on us, as the sparks flies up'ards. Is there any name, gentlemen?"

"Oh! by-the-by, what's its name to be, Quintle?" said the chairman.

"How the devil should I know?" replied Mr. Quintle, with some asperity. "Give it any name you like, or no name at all—what does it matter?"

"We must have some name down on the receiving list," said the clerk, meekly, biting his pen and looking at the chairman.

"Well, you give it one, then," said that functionary, "and look sharp about it; take one out of the dictionary, or out of the almanack, or something. Confound the brat, it's of more importance than half the town!"

The clerk opened a pocket almanack, and almost immediately broke into a suppressed giggle.

"What the doose is the fellow a laughin' at?" said Mrs. Purley, who had very little respect either for clerks or guardians.

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to explain this unseemly mirth, sir?" said one of the board, sternly.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen, the honourable chairman he told me to look in the almanack for a name, and it's —he—he—he!"

"This conduct is really scandalous," said the magis-

terial guardian, looking round with dignity; but, by the time his eye had reached the chairman, to whom the clerk had handed the almanack, that gentleman was also giggling.

"It's rather an odd circumstance," he said; "but —ha, ha, ha!—the fact is, it's Valentine's Day, and a queer sort of valentine our friend Mr. Quintle has had sent to him. But, gentlemen, it's time that we at once proceeded to more important business, and, though a joke's a joke, we've got more serious things to engage the attention of the board. With your permission, gentlemen, the new inmate shall have the benefit of the date of the month. Why not give him the name of Valentine Day?"

This proposition was received with such unbounded applause that the unconscious recipient of the sponsorial honour awoke, and gave so many unmistakable signs of vigour that Mrs. Purley was desired to withdraw.

"Well, you ain't got a bad sort of name, arter all, poor creatur," she said, apostrophising the baby, after she had administered something from a sauce-boat, and had got him to sleep again. "Walentine or no walentine," she continued, as she looked over the small wardrobe which had been sent with him in the basket, "you're no common party's child, for if ever a lady had the makin' o' things, these is done by the fingers of sech; but whether you was born in the bounds o' wenlock or not is more than is easy to tell; though, for my part, I should say not very likely, as there's few comes here that way as can be called

fondlinks; but, at all events, these here garminks shall be kep' out o' the way o' that Mother Scraper, as thinks as she's entitled to everythink. Ah! my little creetur, it's better not to be a fondlink at all than to come to be under a Scraper." With this reflection, which, as it terminated in a grim joke, somewhat raised her drooping spirits, Mrs. Purley stowed the little parcel in the bottom drawer of her own wardrobe, and, having locked it securely, with a triumphant air returned to her duties by feeding a couple of young Irish paupers who were just learning to stand by the aid of the iron fireguard.

It was remarkable, and Mrs. Purley was not slow to notice it, that even the blue check uniform of the workhouse failed to reduce the child to that general level of appearance which rendered it so difficult to distinguish its companions in the infant ward. Its bright brown hair and large blue eyes, as well as its finer skin—fair and smooth as satin, even in spite of the touch of sun-tan which still tinged it about the neck—made it remarkable. Only in one respect did it resemble them: in that anxious, half-inquiring, grievous look which is to be seen in all foundlings—the look that appeals at once to every tender heart as a mute prayer; the look that seems almost to belong to some strange memory of another world, but is really the dumb yearning of the child for her who has profaned nature and left it to the care of strangers.

This expression was the one connecting link which seemed to belong alike to the last inmate of Grundon poorhouse and two of his fellows who crawled and

cried upon the floor; but even these two were twins born in the house, and their mother had run away at the last harvest-time; for, as Grabbett, the relieving officer, had said, they had "no fondlings there."

But there was one heart which, in spite of its own happiness, went out wistfully towards the poor little deserted child. The hand to succour it, the feet to bear it back to a place where it might learn something of a mother's care, would have gone with the heart had they but known the way. The only dark shadow that yet blurred the steady, sober, light of Marion Letsom's joy in her new life in that old-fashioned, comfortable house in which she was mistress, was the thought of what had become of the little one to whom she had transferred the loyalty and gratitude which she felt was due to Silas Waine and his fair-haired daughter, who had cherished her in the one great grief of her youth.

Three days after the events just recorded, Marion sat at the wide curtained window looking into the street that led to the hospital gate, and watching the few passengers who hurried along beneath soaking umbrellas or cowered close to the houses, in the hope of escaping the worst of the ceaseless drizzle. The knitting with which she had been idly busy had fallen in her lap; the fire within just gleamed cheerfully upon the bright metal teapot placed inside the fender to await her husband's return, and she was listening for his foot upon the stair, for he had been out all day, and might come in cold and hungry; slippers, easy-chair, half-read volume—all were ready for him; not

an item in the list of home comforts had been neglected or forgotten, for a clean clay pipe and a paper of tobacco were concealed in a recessed closet where prying eyes would not discover them. She had leisure to think of some other things, and her expectation of her husband was mingled with that of another footstep, which had been long in coming—a light, rapid, stealthy tread, which she thought she could distinguish even there, through all the dulled sounds of the quiet street and the more pervading murmur of the distant thoroughfare.

And she did hear it at the moment when her husband's hand was on the door of the room, for her attention had been absorbed in this second thought, and carried away by the swiftly-gliding figure which she saw approaching beneath the shadow of the houses. A low soft whistle sounded in the street from a deep doorway opposite, and she was about to open the window to beckon the giver of that signal, who had no reason whatever to come there so secretly, except his own dislike to sitting down in a private house, and his disapprobation of Marion's marriage.

She was still standing at the window, looking eagerly into the street, when she heard her husband come in, and turned round to greet him with a face in which anxiety was too plainly expressed to escape his quick glance.

Now, since their marriage, Mr. Letsom had pretended to a sort of jealousy at the hold which her constant thought for the child of Barbara Waine had exercised upon her mind; he had even feigned some

sulky resentment at her continued communications with the gipsies in the person of Rory Lee; but in his heart he honoured the unchanging regard which would extend her gratitude and help to all those who had been her friends. One of the fictions which he had for some time supported, was a jealous dislike of the visits which she had paid to Mr. Philip Ravel when she came to London just before their marriage; but they had no sooner settled down than he himself dispatched a plain, hospitable invitation to that gentleman, who had become quite an expected guest on, at least, one evening a week, when he and Letsom smoked such friendly pipes and discussed subjects of such kindred interest as at once delighted and confounded Marion, who, however, had the satisfaction of seeing with her shrewd woman's wit that the peaceful humdrum, happy life of a pair of middle-aged lovers (as her husband would call themselves) had a certain good influence on that worn and weary "man of the world," which was, after all, no miracle, but only a proof that he was less a man of the world than he professed to be.

"I thought I saw an acquaintance of yours in the street as I came in, Madge," said Letsom; "and you saw him, too, or I'm much mistaken. Does he bring good or ill news, I wonder? Let him come in and be fed and warmed, if he can be persuaded to walk under a slated roof."

She looked up full of love and trust, but stopped to wheel his chair to the fire, and to make the tea, before she rang the bell for their small servant.

"Mr. Letsom expects a patient of his to call here presently," she said to that domestic when she answered the summons. "He is a dark young man, named Lee, and dressed in a sort of country fashion. When he asks for me bring him up here."

In five minutes they heard Rory's foot upon the stair, but when the girl opened the door of the room, he hung back, looking in from the passage jealously, and with something not unlike a scowl.

"Come, Rory, my friend, sit you down and eat and drink; it will be time enough to talk when you've got a little colour in your cheeks, and look as though you'd had a meal since this day six months," said the kind-hearted doctor, cutting a huge slice of cold beef, and pushing a couple of rounds of hot buttered toast on to a spare plate.

The appeal was irresistible, for the gipsy looked thin and worn, and famished: he sat down on the edge of a chair, and, with a few muttered words of thanks, began to eat, slowly at first, but soon ravenously, like a hungry wolf.

"Give him some brandy in his tea," said Mr. Letsom; and Marion poured him out some.

This loosened his tongue a little, and a pair of old slippers and a warm overcoat, in place of his wet jacket and ankle boots, made him still more amenable to friendly influences.

"I've walked all day and nearly all last night," he said, fixing his glittering snaky eyes on Marion, as he bent over the fire to warm his slender brown hands; "and I've no tidings that you will like to hear."

"Have you heard nothing of her, then, or of the child?"

"Of her, yes; of the child, no. But you might, perhaps, guess of one from t'other."

"Where is she?" said Marion, anxiously. "Have you found her?"

"I've found her, but didn't see her; she's where none will see her more. My message is a dumb one, for it's from the grave," he said, moodily, still hanging over the blaze.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Beriah Stoat, the woman as you gave the little one to after she'd lost her own, was seen in Grundon Market asking for you, but without a child; and was seen going out of Grundon without a child, and was seen on the northern road without a child. The messenger that called her away from our folk, as I thought, to lead her back to you, was one from Newcastle, where Stoat, a true Rom, but, as I think, though I'm a Rom myself, one of the worst pals that ever was with our people here in England, had been taken and clapped up in gaol. What for? Don't ask me. For robbery?—No. For something else?—Yes. Not for killing in fight, nor for revenge, but for what folks call murder—for killing that he might lift the silver of an innkeeper, that slept with one eye open. He did enough to hang him, and he was hanged. Can you guess the rest? The news come too quick, and met Beriah on the road; and—and her body was found in a black pool by the hillside; and—and—that's all I know." said Rory,

burying his face in his hands and shuddering convulsively.

Marion groaned. Letsom smoked on in deep thought, then filled a pipe and handed it to the gipsy.

"Smoke, man," he said, kindly, but abruptly. "Marion," he added, gently, "the child is still with some of the people, no doubt, and you will hear of it again. Let Rory stay here to-night; he can sleep in my room on the ground floor, on the sofa, and then he will be near the open air. You'll think more clearly of this to-morrow, when we can plan how to send a message to your Fairhoe people who last saw the poor girl."

"No, no, master," said Rory, between the whiffs which he was now calmly blowing up the chimney, his head almost on a level with his knees. "I couldn't sleep here, though I thank you kindly, and that's a'most more than I thought to ha' done when I come in to-night. I'm off to-morrow to a pal that will lend me a good horse, and so away to find our folk. We've been turned off Fairhoe lands, and there'll be a score to settle there one day. You don't believe in what our folks can tell of things that comes to pass, but if ever I had the gift, and it's strong with the Lees, root and branch, I've got it now when I tell you that I shall be there when the reckoning comes off wi' one that's called James Harrick, though I come across seas to do it."

So saying, and with a touch of the doctor's hand, and a kiss upon Marion's, he turned round and put on his coat and boots, not staying to lace the latter, took his hat, and left the house.

CHAPTER XI.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

Through all the changes of the season—from the latest rustling of the withered leaves to the white winding-sheet of snow that lay upon the fields and hung the boughs with wintry wreaths, that faded under the sad monotony of the rain as it swept and soddened the bare landscape—Oswald Fairhoe remained in the same listless and half-conscious lethargy. He had fallen into this state, not so much in consequence of the strong agony which wrung his mind when his position grew so desperate, as of the means he had taken to drown the sense of it. A stupor of brain and body came of that deep debauch; and, now that he wanted all his best and clearest thoughts, he was incapable of fixing his attention upon the one subject which yet haunted him like some ugly nightmare that clung to his waking faculties and engrossed them without taking any distinct and reasonable shape.

It is hard to deal with a patient who does not wish to recover, and this seemed to be Oswald's case. He would make no effort to rouse himself from the condition into which he had fallen. The virtue and

beauty seemed to have gone out of everything, and forgetfulness to have taken the place of hope. If he could only attain to a stupefaction so complete as to abolish memory and feeling. This, however, was impossible. The improvement in his physical health from his forced temperance and the purer air of the country kept both memory and feeling awake; and he had so far recovered towards Christmas-tide, that at the time when his mother shut up the front rooms of the hall and left their neighbours to suppose that they were spending the season away from home, he could read his letters and go abroad with a gun again, Robert Cobbold walking by his side.

For more than a month after she reached home, in answer to the worthy sergeant's letter telling her that he had taken "Master Oswald" back to Fairhoe, but not saying where or in what state he had found him, she made no allusion to the interview that she had had with Philip Ravel.

She had recovered from the swoon into which she fell after the disclosure made by the barrister—strangely stricken, and with a look of added age very painful to see. Oswald noticed it when they sat on either side of the hearth on the eve of Christmas. Robert Cobbold having gone out for a walk had left them together. They were quite silent; he apparently asleep in the easy-chair, she sitting opposite, her eyes fixed on the fire, from which she shaded her face with her hand.

The room was so still that nothing could be heard but the ticking of the French clock upon the mantel-

piece, and the occasional tinkling of the ashes falling from the grate as the beech log stirred into a fresh flame. A covering of snow muffled all noises outside the house, so that neither a footfall nor the tramp of a horse's-hoof could have been heard at any distance. A dead, oppressive silence reigned everywhere, and weighed heavily upon her heart as she sat and thought of all that had passed, and stole a look of bitter grief and disappointment at the figure of her son, who lay so still that she fancied he might be dead, and once bent forward to see that he breathed.

There were no lights in the room, except such gleams as came from the fitful blaze of the wood upon the hearth. She wanted no lights, and had not rung for them. All was still and dead within and without, and the light of her own heart was quenched. There lay her pride, her hope, he for whom she had lived, and who was to sustain and augment the honour of the house, to emblazon afresh the escutcheon which had been above the weakness even of noble quarterings. There he lay, a helpless, besotted wretch, with a dread secret which had never passed between them; a secret which, if all that she had heard were true, would for ever blast all the schemes she had made for him, and bring her sorrowful life to shame. Would that she could set it at rest for ever, could glide easily out of the world, and feel the grave close over her without a pang. But she must leave him behind after all. Leave him to whom and to what? To an imbecile life and a drunkard's death, perhaps; for Cobbold had been obliged to account for his young master's state,

and had told the truth that the wine cellar might not be opened to his speedy destruction. Another week or two, the honest sergeant had said, speaking from his past experience, and the crisis would be over, he would have lost the fierce longing for drink and might be better trusted.

This was the end of it, then. Oswald, perhaps, married; and with a nameless child and a wife who had gone no one knew whither. Why had she been so hard, so precipitate; why not have seen the girl and learnt the truth? Why not have given way to what seemed inevitable? It was too late now. A week or two? What might not happen before that time? This lonely, silent Christmas-tide, with all the joy gone from the hearth where she had been widowed, and now seemed worse than childless, might scarcely pass before the grave had closed upon her for ever. The wintry cold and the stillness of death seemed to have crept into her heart too, and who could tell how near the end might be? She was not prepared for that awful change; but who had ever been really prepared for the future, of which they knew so little? What she had done had surely been no sin; it was against the very nature and ordination of things that a Fairhoe should ally himself to any woman who could not bring to him a name, or at all events a fortune, equal to his own. Ah! that she had done with all these anxious cares. Supposing that the end should really come—come now—in that deep and deathlike silence; and that, when the grey, cold morning dawned, and the fire had died out, the servants should

come in and find her also dead and cold, sitting opposite to her son, who, perhaps, would scarcely awake to any strong exhibition of sorrow even when he found that she had fallen into her last sleep. Sudden death! why should people pray to be delivered from that? It would be better than a long lingering upon the brink of the grave, surely. Perhaps a single, sharp, sudden pang, a strong momentary agony; possibly no more than a gentle deprivation of feeling, a sudden floating away into that state which is so often felt between sleeping and waking—a loss of breath, a dimness of the eyes, and so unconsciousness—a sleep in which the soul can return no more to the body, or, doing so, finds that it is outside the body, and that all that cumbrous instrument is turned to cold clay, and can work its will no more. Such a death would seem so easy and so natural that one might almost will to die—might, by a voluntary suspension of every physical function, reach to the last sleep of all. Had such a thing ever been done? Who would care if she could do so there and then? Well, her poor sister, Mrs. Gabriel, might; and how she would chide her with tender words if she knew to what her thoughts tended. Whither were they tending away from that inanimate figure opposite, the son for whom she had suffered so much, and who had brought disappointment, if not shame, upon her in return? She could scarcely be certain now that he ever loved her as he had once done, and she might never know more.

With a sudden effort she shook herself free from the spell which her own morbid fancies seemed to have

wrought upon her; and, shuddering with the feeling that in another minute she might actually have found that half voluntary death of which she had been dreaming, turned to look at Oswald.

To her surprise, he was sitting there awake, and with his eyes fixed upon her face—eyes into which awakened light of love and pity had come. He leant forward in the chair, silently watching her, and a tear stood on his cheek.

He looked at her for a few moments without speaking, but his lips trembled and his face was contracted with a strong spasm of deep emotion; then he held out both his hands, and, uttering an inarticulate cry, knelt at her feet.

"Mother!" he said: "mother!" and in the tone of his voice there was expressed an agony of pleading remorse which for the time caused her to forget all the bitter reproaches which she had prepared for him.

Of such contradictory elements are we composed, that the sudden cry of her son and his first waking gesture of mingled love and pity overwhelmed her with a joy which swept away for a time almost all the resentment which had been gathering strength until its force had crushed her health and smitten her worn, stern face with the look of sudden age.

The hidden springs of maternity that lay in her heart beneath the obdurate crust of pride and contempt burst suddenly to the surface; it was her child who knelt there at her feet, and as his face was lightened by that look of returning interest the years seemed to fall away, and with them the brooding sorrows and

regrets, plots and errors, that had made their calendar so dark. With her hands clasped round his neck as his face rested in her lap, she bowed her head upon his bright curls, just as she had done when they were almost children together, and the mother had found a playfellow in her first-born. Not a word was spoken, except in such uncertain fashion as might have belonged to that childish language in the far-off days when he sat upon her knee and played with the jewel that hung from her neck. Presently there came a gentle knock at the door, and she gave no answer, for her tears were falling gently like the rain, that will have its way, and she dared not stay them. When Robert Cobbold came in, thinking that Oswald was alone, he saw and wondered at this strange sight, and would have gone softly from the room, but she bade him stay in a voice so altered and so gentle that he closed the door, as though it belonged to a sick-room, and, walking quietly to the window, looked out at the snow.

"I want you to see that nothing can estrange my son and me," she said, presently, in the same altered voice; "nothing, nothing. You have been his best friend, Robert," she added, after a pause; "and I would have you remember that nothing, that nobody in the world can estrange us. I think you will soon be able to leave us together again now; accept a mother's thanks for all your true service and regard: we need no words between us, Oswald and I, to make sure of our love for each other; and you, at least, will remember this when you think of to-night. It is Christmas

Eve, and the weather is very cold. Yes—yes! Remember it when you think that there was ever any cause of disagreement between us. No matter what cause, I am his mother, he is my son; and he will rise out of this malady, and grow strong again. When we meet to-morrow he can tell me what I cannot hear to-night. Will you ring the bell and ask my maid to come up stairs? I am not well; I have been greatly distressed, but that will be over soon, and then I shall have rest, and we shall be together again in this dull, old house till next spring; everything will be new, and the past will be blotted out; all that has come between us will be forgotten, and we shall know each other better; we cannot love each other more—you see that, Cobbold? May I ask you to lend me your arm?"

She leaned very heavily upon him, the sergeant thought, as he advanced and helped her to rise. Oswald stood beside her, however, and they went to the door together, her hand upon her son's shoulder. When they had reached the passage she turned and kissed him, he holding her gently and bidding her send him a message in the morning, if she could not breakfast with him early. Then she passed up the stairs with a step so slow and feeble that the servant-girl looked at her with some alarm. An hour afterwards the same girl went down to old John and asked him for some wine, that she might make it hot for her mistress, who complained of feeling numb and cold, but had forbidden her to go into the drawing-room to tell Mr. Oswald, who was, in fact, still sitting there, looking at the smouldering log upon the hearth, and

silently rallying his thoughts from the confusion in which they had been so long plunged.

Cobbold sat opposite, silently watching him from behind a short pipe; but there was nothing but water and coffee on the table — and, indeed, the honest soldier had made a call on his own account at a farm-house that lay within the course of his evening walk, where he had been hospitably entertained with that combination of gin and ale which was, and is still, the peculiar beverage of the county.

When at length Oswald looked up and saw the steady look with which his companion regarded him, he smiled feebly, and with an evident effort began to speak of his mother.

"I have almost broken her heart, Cobbold," he said, moodily, and without further preface, "and she has almost done the same by mine. Even now I dread to-morrow, for she has something to say to me that I dare not answer. It is a hard thing that the Bible tells us, that a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife."

The sergeant was a little astonished; he had always believed that Oswald had wronged Barbara Waine, and that he had only intended to marry her; that she was his wife only in the sense of being so "before Heaven"—a phrase which has often been used blasphemously by men who had no intention to ratify the solemn compact by submitting it to legal forms, since the law is so much stronger than Heaven in the small arena of those social claims and responsibilities which are recognised by custom and society.

"Our duty is often about the hardest thing we have to do, Master Oswald," he said, when he found tongue; "I've found that out before now."

A peculiar look came into Oswald's face. "Yes, I know you have," he said, holding out his hand. "God bless you, Cobbold! you thought it your duty to come down here to me. Did you come down, or did you bring me? I have a dreamy fancy—a horrible recollection of your dragging me from some place where a woman came to taunt me and goad me to madness; a woman who looked like my cousin Amina Fairhoe; and then there came a sort of blank time, when you were always by to give me an arm and to keep me away from drink and from going back to that same place. It's all confused to me to-night, because I've awakened suddenly, as though I had dreamed some terrible dream and afterwards come to myself to find that I was lying in my mother's arms, with her face close to mine, and her gentle voice scaring away the evil fancies from me. I say you thought it your duty to come down here and be with me when I might have been lost, or might have died in some low London pot-house, as that she fiend threatened me; and you must have found it hard indeed. My mother will thank you, Cobbold; if even I die my mother will thank you."

"I don't think you are like to die at present, Master Oswald," said the sergeant, returning his pressure of the hand; "leastways, I hope not until you've done your duty to them that's living—to your mother; and if so be there's one that comes before your mother, to her too."

Oswald looked at him solemnly, leant forward, and stretched out his hand as though he meant to speak, and then fell back again in his chair without uttering a word.

"To-morrow," he said, presently, and speaking more to himself than to his companion; "to-morrow she will know all, and if I could but undo the past, she should have her will; for what is love to me now but a name and a shadow on the wall that only shows the darkness made by something which has gone far off, where I can never reach it. To-morrow, to-morrow! and then let me live on about this dull old house, its master only in name, until the end come. I'll live for her, and, as she says, let all the past be blotted out and forgotten. Poor Barbara, poor Barbara!"

He rose as he spoke, and, taking up a chamber candlestick, lighted the candle at the fire and moved towards the door, but came back again presently to lay his hand upon Cobbold's shoulder.

"There's no fear for me now, old friend," he said; "I begin a new life to-morrow, if life it can be called, when it depends upon the death of the hopes that had been formed for me and those that I had formed for myself. You'll breakfast with me in the morning, and then I'll ask you to have the horses put to; for I'll drive her to church. I heard her say that to-morrow would be Christmas Day, the very day for a reconciliation such as ours. Yes; then I'll tell her all, and we shall begin afresh. To-morrow, to-morrow," he repeated, as he went slowly out.

The sergeant stayed for some time alone, smoking

his pipe and watching the feathery ashes in the grate, and the long trains of sparks that came and went through them like files of soldiers winding along a mountain pass, sometimes disappearing, and again starting out in some place where the road crossed a ridge or widened into a valley.

He was conscious of making this comparison and of thinking about it, though at the same time he was half-engrossed by other thoughts, which had occupied him ever since his return.

During his visit to the farmhouse the conversation had turned upon the new steward, who had contrived to make himself disliked in a few days after his arrival, and had won no good-will for the high-handed manner he had assumed even towards the gipsies. Cobbold had been wondering what had become of Marion Rooke, who was away in London, and still more whether she had faithfully kept the charge that had been confided to her. Would Oswald tell his mother all this painful story, and so bring home that little outcast child? He would have far to seek it, perhaps; and who could tell whither the gipsy foster-mother had been driven, now that Harrick had warned the people off. That evening as he left the farm, and was striding back, he came upon Harrick himself, riding at a smart pace down the road; and the steward had not yet seen Oswald, though he had met the sergeant once or twice on his visits to the house to confer with Mrs. Fairhoe.

Cobbold would have passed on with a short "Good-night!" for he scarcely liked the looks of the man, whose whole expression differed so greatly when he

was talking to his mistress, that the sergeant had pronounced him to be a "hangdog sort of a chap," in one of those familiar conferences which he was in the habit of holding with himself. It was not easy to shake him off, however; for after he had passed he suddenly turned and rode back again to inquire after Oswald's health; and then followed a string of artful leading questions as to the illness from which he had been suffering, and an allusion to his approaching marriage with Miss Blamyre—a subject of which the sergeant knew little or nothing, and gave replies which were none the less gruff and short because of the persistency of the other in dwelling upon it. That which had annoyed Cobbold most, however, was his referring to some gossip which had been "going about in the neighbourhood" in reference to "my predecessor" here, who "had a daughter, a good-looking wench, too, if what people say is true." The insufferable insolence of manner, and the coarse, repulsive tone in which the fellow spoke, and through it all, evidently tried to lead the old soldier on to make some disclosure, irritated him beyond measure. Even now, when he thought of it, his teeth clenched with such force that the stem of his pipe was bitten through, and the pipe itself falling with a crash brought him to himself.

"We must wait till to-morrow," he said, with a sigh, as he threw the broken pieces into the ashes, whence the fire had all died out; "and yet they say to-morrow never comes."

That morrow never did come.

Early in the morning as the sergeant was shaving by the light of a candle, he heard hurried footsteps on the stairs, and the opening and shutting of one of the lower doors; then came a bustle and confusion in the passage; and he went out that he might hear if anything was amiss.

He had scarcely looked over the baluster before a scream, repeated by more than one woman's voice, was heard in Mrs. Fairhoe's chamber, and Oswald came wildly out of his own bed-room, calling to know what was the matter.

By the time that Cobbold had run back for his coat the screaming had been hushed, and as he ran down stairs he saw the door close upon Oswald, as he entered his mother's room. For nearly an hour did the sergeant walk backward and forward in the breakfast-room, waiting to know what had happened; and then the two women-servants came in together, their eyes red and swollen, and their hair all loose as though they had had no time to think of themselves since that first alarm.

"Oswald had not yet left Mrs. Fairhoe's room; he was kneeling there by the bedside, and ——" here the girls broke out into a passionate burst of weeping. "She had never spoken to any of them, not to him even; never would speak to again now, for she was dead."

"She had complained of feeling strange and cold the night before when she went to bed, and had been unlike herself; but yet so kind and so familiar," the girl said;—when talking to her about some disagree-

able fancies that she had had while sitting by the fire in the drawing-room; not that she said they were disagreeable, for she seemed quite curious about them, and once or twice she spoke confused-like, and as though she couldn't remember her words, and sometimes saying one thing over again. The girl had asked if she should sleep with her, but she would not hear of it, and dropped into a doze after a glass of hot negus, as though she would be quite comfortable for the night. It being Christmas Eve, and the servants staying up a little later in the kitchen, the girl had gone down again, but went in softly to look at her mistress before she went to bed herself in the little ante-room. Before daylight she had been awakened by a moaning sound, and when she ran in to see what was the matter, Mrs. Fairhoe was sitting in the easy-chair by the window, wrapped in her fur gown and with a lighted candle on the table. Her little inlaid writing-desk was at her feet; but though she pointed to it and tried to make them understand, she could only make a sort of moaning noise, and all one side seemed "quite dead-like. Just for a minute after they had got her to bed, the light seemed to come back into her eyes; but that was only when Mr. Oswald came in and knelt down by the side of her and took her hand. She couldn't have lived more than a few minutes after that; the life seemed to go out of her just like blowing out a candle, and she never spoke."

So the morrow had come, and those waking dreams of the night before had been interpreted. The white

snow enshrouded wood and field, and lay all smooth and cold upon the garden paths and blotted out the life of the landscape around Fairhoe, and Fairhoe's mistress lay dead in that darkened room.

Robert Cobbold still sat patiently waiting for Oswald's return. The morning sun glinted faintly on the white tree tops, but its light was pale and cold. Not a sound was heard without, for they were too far from the church to hear the Christmas chimes; and in the house the hush that follows the muffled footsteps of death had settled down.

Presently Oswald came in, with a fixed expression of face, and with swollen eyes, but no longer with that dull, listless air. Strangely enough, this great sorrow, coming so swift and keen, had seemed to awaken him to life, as a surgeon's knife, or any sharp, physical pain, will sometimes revive a half-useless limb. He came to the table, and sitting down, with an awful look, clasped the sergeant's hand, and then, leaning his head upon the table, seemed to make an effort to appear calm and strong. He even tried to eat, and poured himself out some coffee.

There was more reality in his grief amidst this effort than there had ever been in the sorrow that he had hugged so selfishly a few months before, or than that mock despair which had driven him to brandy for consolation.

On the evening of the third day after having spoken with Harrick, who had come up to the house to see him, and had been invited to the funeral, Oswald asked his companion to go out with him. The snow

had nearly all disappeared, swept away by a remorseless rain, which plashed in deep, half-frozen pools, and brought down the last remnants of the ice-wreaths from the trees; a dull, leaden sky seemed to overhang fields and roads of the same colour; a cold, wet wind swept the bare branches and surged dismally amidst the hedges; but they could stay in-doors no longer; the sight of the man who had come to fill the steward's place awakened memories too painful to be borne inactively. It was a healthy sign that this was so, and Cobbold set out cheerfully enough, though he felt his companion hang rather heavily on his arm, and saw that he was brooding on past troubles.

So they went on, slowly and silently, until the day drew in and a bank of black clouds warned them that they might expect stormy weather. They had turned, and were about to cross a stile that they might reach home another way, when they saw a man coming across the field by a by-path leading into the lane. He was dressed in a rough, seafaring fashion, and looked about him as though he had been directed to take a road of which he was uncertain. On seeing them, he quickened his pace and came up to where they stood.

"Mebbe you can tell me, master, whereby I can find a house called Fairhoe; and, for the matter o' that, a gentleman that bears the same name 's the house."

"It is not far off," said Oswald, who was scanning the man's dress and appearance with wild eyes and a

half-scared, foreboding look; "but what do you want with him?"

"With Muster Fairhoe, d'ye mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, you see, I've a sort o' message for him—a letter; one that may be full o' grief and trouble, but yet one that he ought to have, for it's been cast up by the ocean o' purpose; and no good can't ever come of keepin' back such as that; no man ever was known to do such a thing as to refuse to give a message from the sea."

"Give it me! give it me! Let me know the worst at once," said Oswald, holding out his hand. "I am Oswald Fairhoe."

There was conviction in his very tone; and, with a glance at Cobbold to see if he confirmed it, the man took a parcel wrapped in a handkerchief from the deep pocket of his rough coat.

The handkerchief contained a bottle and a little roll of paper.

"You see, sir, my brother he's a seafarin' man, like myself, except that I'm in the coastguard service; and he, just come back from a voyage, brings this home, found washed ashore by his boat's crew when they landed one day for provisions. The which, he no sooner comes home than he hands it to me, because, he says, 'William, you're more under Government like than I am, and it's more fittin' as you should deliver it.'"

Before the man had finished his explanation, Oswald had taken the roll of paper from his hand; had

read the few words so faintly traced there; and, with a sudden cry, had staggered back to the stile, where he leaned with his bare head all streaming with the rain and resting on his clenched hands.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GHOST OF WEDDING BELLS.

Oswald Fairhoe was smitten down with this fresh blow, while the corpse of his mother lay unburied in the darkened room at home; and yet, although he went back stunned and hopeless, he felt that in some mysterious way the second calamity had but filled the cup of sorrow to the brim without overflowing it.

It seemed to him that the bitterest part of both calamities was, that either might have been prevented had the other but occurred earlier. This reflection was only vaguely presented to his mind, of course; for, though all the subtle train of feeling that suggested it was born of selfishness, and not of remorse, even his nature was not so far depraved as calmly to calculate its regrets when either event was one of such deep and abiding sorrow.

"On board the ship Iphigenia," so the letter ran which he had carried home clenched in his hand, and sat down with agony in his heart to read and read again, until his eyes sought the words mechanically, and made fantastic anagrams of them, and saw them lighted by red and blue sparks that seemed to dance

upon the crumpled paper. At midnight, and when candles had been brought and the tea that had been prepared for him had gone away untasted, Robert Cobbold still found him sitting at the table, his head resting on his hands, the bottle from which the roll of paper had been withdrawn standing beside him.

"On board the ship Iphigenia at sea.

"By what name am I to call you—I, who am your wife and yet who have been left to go away and never to see you or to see my child, our child again? To the last I believed in your truth and that your love for me would never let me go, but would explain all. Now I know all that I might have suffered if I had stayed, and yet my heart is not broken. It will soon be cold, for, if the storm continues, there is no hope for us here, and I shall find a grave under the waves. If you ever had any love for me—if you are not lost to all mercy and justice, and your cruel mother is not less than a woman, find our child. I say find him, and yet I hope that he is a little angel in heaven, where I pray to find him soon myself. I pray, but I can scarcely hope for it after my cruelty and sin. Remember me sometimes, Oswald, and if you have any lingering pity for the fate of one whom you vowed before Heaven to love and cherish, let it plead with you for that poor deserted baby. Marion Rooke knows where he may be found; she will not have cast him off. If this bottle is found we shall have been lost at sea. I think you will, *you must*, be sorry to know that I am dead, if only for the love that I bore you and for all that I suffered. I

forgive you, and kiss this letter as I say good-bye for ever in this world.

"BARBARA FAIRHOE."

Oswald rose at last from reading and re-reading this letter, and, with a weary look, carried it away to his own room, where he locked it in the secretaire belonging to that old bookcase where his papers were kept. Then he walked up and down listening to the lashing of the rain, and thinking of that ship far out at sea driving swiftly to destruction. He thought, as he moved hurriedly but silently to and fro in that bare room where the draught from the chimney flared the solitary candle and the boughs outside moaned and rattled on the window, that he heard the cries of the helpless people on board, and could conjure up two figures standing, as he fancied, clinging to each other and looking towards home—one, a grey-headed but strong and sturdy man, with a dark, stern face, set in a grim, determined look that would yield nothing to fate or fortune, because he denied them both; the other a slender, fair-haired woman, her golden locks all tossed and streaming in the angry wind, her face full of a despairing, quiet sorrow. In every hush of the wind, which had now risen to a storm, even there he could hear the words of that last fatal letter spoken in her plaintive voice, until, in one wild, tempestuous burst, the vessel and those upon its deck were swept away, and nothing was left but the seething waves that tossed in great white hills of foam.

The sudden gust of wind and rain that had brought

this climax to his disordered fancies was so violent that it tore down the bare branches of the climbing shrub that grew beside the window, and, crashing through the casement, the gnarled boughs forced a way into the room, and seemed to beckon him like gaunt, knotted arms. The accident was in itself sufficient to recall him, however, for he went at once and closed the shutters, and, his candle having been blown out by the wind, groped his way out and walked slowly up stairs to bed.

He paused before the door of that ante-room which led to the chamber of death where the body of his mother lay waiting for the arrival of those who would assemble to mourn and to wonder that she of all women should not have been spared—she who had so lately been regarded as the example of an aristocratic strength and pride which might have extorted respect even from the great leveller, Death.

Indeed, at the great, dull family house in London, Vivian Bullpoint, whose diplomatic soul was so grieved at the loss of his sister that the muscles of his face had relaxed and his eyeglass could no longer be made a fixture, had declared that "if that sort of thing went on, you know, there would be nobody left in the country. Mystery to me," said that gentleman; "can't for the life of me make out where we're all going to, what with the democratic fellers and the Reform Bill, and all that. Shouldn't wonder if there's a row about the Reform Bill now, and that we shall have to call out the old Dook. He's looked death in the face often enough, no doubt, and, egad, 'pon my honour, I

shouldn't wonder if he could look a democrat in the face. Ha! ha! very much alike, no doubt."

This remark, which was made in the family circle, was received with some appreciation, and Vivian had begun to indulge in a faint laugh, especially at his allusion to the Duke of Wellington, whose windows had already suffered from the zeal of the unenfranchised; but, remembering the awful occasion which had given rise to his remarks, he suddenly assumed a solemn aspect.

At the antechamber, then, Oswald stopped on that night when the waves of sorrow seemed to have broken over him and made shipwreck of his hitherto battered life. He had no horror of what lay within; only awe at the thought of that sudden and irremediable loss. The proud face lying there in the midst of the cold, stiff, white drapery seemed to have been frozen with a smile upon its lips, and a look of love lingering even about that brow that was so rigid amidst the silver setting of the smooth grey hair. Standing there outside the door he could think of that face as it was in life years before, when he was a petted, wayward boy; could think of it in its look of entreaty before his opposition had contracted it and marked with harsher distinctness its proud, defiant lineaments; could think of her entreaties and her pain; and yet amidst it all he seemed to hear the surging sound of the sea, where fathoms down there lay another face cold and still, with its fair hair stirred gently amidst the calm that was too deep for wind or waves above it to disturb.

He thought of this, and yet he felt no overmastering

pang, for there was a stillness in his soul, too, and he knelt down before the door, covering his eyes with his folded hands, then with a few whispered words of prayer—or resolution—went quietly to his own room and fell asleep outside the bed.

Yes; the morning found him singularly calm and composed. A great stillness seemed to have come upon him—a sort of middle-agedness, as one might say, or rather a levelness, as though he felt that all life was thenceforth to him only a plain thing—a simple, dull story, from which plot and passion had been excluded. The past shadowed all the present—threw its darkness far even into the future. Had he been a man of strength of will, of ambition, of deep passions, he might have ended his days in the dull duration of a convent life, seeking in severe penances an outlet for fierce memories or sudden thrills of feeling; as it was, he perhaps hardly realised all the intensity of meaning in those wonderful lines of Schiller which he and many like him were at that time fond of repeating. How do they run :—

> Verschmerzen werd ich diesen Schlag, dass weiss ich,
> Denn was verschmerzte nicht du mensch ! ”

which, being uninterpretable, mean :—

> I shall wear down this blow with grief, I know ;
> What is there that a man does not grieve down ?

The truth is, that Oswald, having little about him that was heroic, was yet steadfastly subjecting his life to a duty, or what he considered to be a duty. Having

missed happiness, and at the same time being conscious that he had wrought misery, he had formed a settled purpose. If he had never recognised what he owed to the living, he would carry out his obligations to the dead. Having nothing left to sacrifice, he would do for the memory of his mother what he had refused to do under her living influence. The period of mourning over, he would marry Caroline Blamyre; and all the recollections of that dark and bitter past should be locked in his own heart with the chastened grief for the wife that he had lost before she had been acknowledged. This was the way in which he paltered with his real duty still. The living wife made a victim to the selfish cowardice which dared not claim her for his own; her death had released him from the necessity for acknowledging his guilt. The sea held his secret now, and he could give at least the outward seeming of an honourable alliance and the pale presentment of a husband's love to the bride who was awaiting him.

It is astonishing how, to weak natures, even an unworthy purpose, so that it may be made to seem just and expedient, supplies a certain firmness, a fictitious strength.

On the very morning of his mother's funeral he retained that spiritless calm which passes for resolution, and even looked through the papers and deeds that showed him how the estates had been involved, and how necessary the dowry which Lady Flakestone would give with her daughter had become to meet the possible claims of Walter Fairhoe, should he act upon

that will which lay in Lawyer Sharpe's strong box at Grundon.

He had just received a letter from Miss Blamyre herself, in answer to that in which he had announced his mother's death.

Lady Flakestone and her daughter had gone on to France; regretted that they could not be present to pay the last tribute of respect; were inexpressibly shocked at a calamity which they need hardly say, in reply to his reminder of the contemplated relations they might sustain, had been a keen personal sorrow; and so on—a diplomatic condolence, a carefully composed and polite expression of sympathy, so worded as to ratify the proposed alliance.

This chilled him a little, but he liked it none the less at that time; there was no fervour left in him, his path lay altogether away from strong emotion for the future. Could he but live on in the dull, quiet round of a country gentleman, without ambitions and with all his energies subdued to act the part of a kind husband to a wife whose imperious bearing would need some sober foil, that was the nearest approach to pleasure he might find, apart from the horrible excess to which, to do him justice, he now looked back with loathing.

The loss of the Iphigenia was no secret. The chief mate's letter had already appeared in the newspapers; portions of the wreck of that ill-fated vessel had been picked up at sea; one piece of timber with her name in letters of blue and gold, not yet obscured by the drift that clung to it; two of her boats had been picked up also, shattered and broken, on a lonely rock where

some adventurous explorers had landed; the underwriters had begun to regard their losses as best they might, and a list of the crew and passengers had been written out, which made a few more mourners here and there in England.

Amongst these Mr. and Mrs. Petifer were not the least distressed, though over their quiet household the tidings brought a sorrow almost too deep for ordinary forms of mourning. The good old gentleman, who had been superannuated, and only attended at his office from force of habit, and because he would not acknowledge that he was growing feebler, felt the loss very keenly, and would take the little books that Barbara had loved to read from their shelf in the old-fashioned bureau, and sit gazing at them, without reading a word, as though they some way helped him to realise that pretty childish face, that slender, girlish form, which had graced his fireside so often. Mrs. Petifer was quite quiet and subdued; but the intelligence had come upon her very suddenly, and she moved about the house for some days afterwards as though the dead girl, whom she could only think of as a child, lay in one of the upper rooms, where the blinds were drawn down. As the time went by, the first great sorrow diminished; but the sense of it remained, and Mr. Philip Ravel, who was a frequent but silent visitor, felt some kind of comfort to his own heavy heart to hear the tender regrets of these good old people for the father who had so sternly taken his daughter to her death. Mrs. Petifer had read the barrister's secret on that very night when he had come to

meet Marion Rooke, and when Ravel saw her kind, bright old eyes fixed mournfully upon him, and her soft white hand stealing to his shoulder, as she said, "Poor fellow, poor dear boy," he found comfort in it, though no word more had passed between them.

He had received an invitation from Oswald to be present at his mother's funeral, and on the appointed morning found himself in the midst of a silent family party of the Bullpoints, one or two less intimate connections, and Raph Fairhoe, who lurked suspiciously about the room, and seemed from his manner to be suffering from the consciousness of some unpleasant secret.

What this secret was Ravel began to guess, when on his asking after Miss Amina, Ralph turned on him almost with a snarl, and said that she had left London on a long visit to a friend in Paris, that she had gone quite suddenly, and against his wish, two or three months before, and that from that time to this he had neither seen nor heard from his nephew.

It was evident, however, that Ralph Fairhoe shunned the rest of the company, and, though he seemed sometimes to watch his nephew eagerly and to be influenced by some unpleasant reflections, he spoke little, until the funeral procession started, when Ravel remarked that he had contrived to give up his place in the first carriage to one of the less intimate relations, and was in deep conference with the new steward, who rode alone with him in a mourning-coach that brought up the rear with some of the farmers.

The ceremony was over. "Our dear sister now de-

parted" had been consigned to that desolate old family vault in the churchyard, far away from the bright, flower-dotted cemetery where her husband lay. The visitors had all gone their ways, after such vain attempts at conversational condolence and such stereotyped moralising as they could bring themselves to improve, by an effort to utter them in new forms of speech. The house sounded empty and hollow when the last carriage-wheels had driven out of hearing, and Oswald sat down before a pile of books and papers at the table in the dining-room.

Philip Ravel still lingered. He had waited to watch Ralph off, who could not refuse a seat in the Bullpoint family coach, into which James Harrick, who was in waiting for an interview to which he had been summoned by his master, had assisted to heave Sir Langley.

"I am very glad, Harrick, very glad indeed, to leave my nephew in such good hands. The very aw—a—sad and—and unprecedented occasion of our being here to-day makes me still more—aw—satisfied that I was able to secure your services for the estate."

Harrick bowed his thanks, and, with a covert glance at Ralph, shut the carriage-door, obsequiously watching till the turn of the road was reached, and then turning away with a smile that was not pleasant to see. So Robert Cobbold thought, who was packing up his modest wardrobe at an upper window, out of which he looked between whiles.

He, too, had said good-bye; for Oswald, who had shown some unmistakeable emotion when he grasped

the honest soldier's hand, and had promised to visit him soon, had determined to go abroad, he said, and seek some relief from change of scene. He would take only a groom with him—a young fellow who had been already engaged for the purpose, and who was so well recommended that he might easily be trusted.

Mrs. Gabriel, his aunt, would stay and keep house at Fairhoe until his return—indeed, that sweet lady had already laid aside the heavy mourning which she had worn while "the family," who had just learnt to tolerate her, was present; and now (her pale face and swollen eyes bearing evidence that she had found some relief from the first sudden shock of grief) quietly busied herself in such household matters as should prepare for her nephew's departure. Only Philip Ravel lingered, and Cobbold, who was to travel with him by the coach, wondered that he was not ready.

Oswald, seeing that he had some last word for him, and fearing what that word might be, began to fidget at the table, from which he rose to say good-bye with his most distant manner.

"I want one word with you before I go," said the barrister; "especially as I hear that you are not likely to be in England for some time to come. Pardon me, I ask from no idle curiosity," he added, with some embarrassment. "Do you intend following Lady Flakestone to France?"

"I don't know; I really can't tell you; and—and I can't see that you have any reason for the question," replied Oswald, flushing. "Permit me, in turn, to ask why you take such an interest in my movements?"

Ravel looked at him very sorrowfully and earnestly. "Have you forgotten that morning at our chambers, and our conversation then?" he said.

"No; I have no need to be reminded of it," retorted the other, with a certain deliberation, and an expression as though he forced himself to use a set form of words. "That belongs to the past, and I shall never forget it. The subject of it will influence my whole life, Mr. Ravel. Did I say my life? I have no life. I should have said my whole future."

The barrister was amazed at the cold, even almost hopeless, tone in which he spoke; more still at the determination expressed by his look and gesture. He could not guess what strength a weak and self-conscious soul may derive from a narrow resolution and from the sense of being free to carry out its will.

"I must ask you whether it is your intention—I will speak plainly—to marry Miss Blamyre?" he replied, with such a nervous manner that, had he been seen by the Bench or the Bar, his practice would not have been worth twopence from that moment.

"Has she asked you to demand my intentions?" retorted Oswald, in the same voice.

"No. I ask in the interest of those who have some respect for the memory of the dead. I represent the only relatives of that pure, loving girl, now, as we fear—or, rather I should say, as we hope—in heaven. In her interest, and in her child's, in your child's, you should answer me, before you take another wife, and bring fresh claims upon yourself that may work misery to you and to the infant who is your heir."

"Let me tell you this much, and let it suffice, Mr. Ravel," replied Oswald, a little more excitedly. "All the misery that is likely to ensue to me has been wrought already. What I may do *will* be as you hint, out of respect for the memory of the dead. I need no reminder, surely, of what I owe to that memory, coming, as I do, from my mother's grave. Would to Heaven that I had regarded her living wish as earnestly as I have set myself now to atone for the past! I will not now enter into all that you assume to know of my affairs, or your right to interfere with them. I have a stronger influence than yours to try and find the child you speak of, if it should be alive; but, whether or not, you can do no good by opposing any course that I may have set upon. Your laying before Lady Flakestone and her daughter all that you know, or assume to know, cannot restore Barbara Waine——"

"Barbara Fairhoe," interrupted Ravel.

Oswald just inclined his head with an expression which for the moment, in spite of his fair hair and face and his blue eyes, irresistibly reminded the barrister of his uncle Ralph. "Barbara, then," he continued, "let the name you choose to call her by remain, as I am the only person present who can know the true one. She cannot be restored to life: if she could, and my life would purchase such a miracle, I would give it freely. It is for the interest of the living as well as for the memory of the dead that I shall make any such alliance as will now be possible. Let me urge this upon you, Mr. Ravel, without seeming to resent your friendly offices. I shall have to see my steward pre-

sently, to arrange accounts before I leave on my journey. It is no pleasure trip, believe me. If I had my will I should shut myself up here in this dull house and see no soul but my aunt Gabriel and the servants who might wait upon us both. Nay, if I had my will, I might even be tempted to give up name and station and all that most people make account of and go away, wandering hither and thither, a solitary wretch, compared with whom the poorest vagrant that begs a crust upon this country road would be a happy and an enviable man."

He sunk down upon the chair and covered his eyes for a moment with his hands; but rose again directly, as though he had been betrayed from the purpose which he had set himself to execute.

Ravel saw that further conversation would be useless, and so said his "Good-bye!" and went away with feelings of pity not unmingled with deep surprise at the altered manner which seemed to have come upon that weak, wayward nature, and to make it appear as though it had gone through some petrifying or crystallising process, by which its very elements were altered in form if not in substance.

The golden sunlight steeped the rich red leaves again; the broad brown fields waved and rustled with the coming harvest, or lay in yellow stubble, on which the light clouds threw such changing shadows that they seemed to take new shades and shapes. All round that old house at Fairhoe the woods were gay with late blossom, and the deep green undergrowth hid a wealth of beauty to be discovered only by the

diligent seeker who knew some of Nature's secrets. The undulating fields and quiet upland pastures were bright with the contrasted hues of rich loam and tender greenery, and the stream murmured as it flowed, like a silver string adding its gentle undertone to the soft harmony of woods and fields. The house itself, standing on the sloping land and showing, as it were, its chin above the woods which clustered about its front, had been partially closed long enough to have shown those signs of disuse which so quickly grow into dilapidations and then hasten on the marks of inevitable decay. The great drawing-room had been screened by heavy blinds, and several of the bed-chambers seemed not to have reopened their windows since they were last closed, at Mrs. Fairhoe's death. The same old depressing influence which had hung about the place at the time when our history commenced had come down upon it now; and with its recurrence the memory of the haunted walk in that stunted coppice had revived, the tradition having been mysteriously whispered in the kitchen by some old gossip from the village.

These idle reports languished, however, now that the summer's wealth had ripened into the fruition of autumn, for there was much to be done; and the new steward, who had sneered at such tales with the remark that he never expected to see anything worse than himself in the Fairhoe wood (an observation, by-the-bye, which more than one of his hearers indorsed in their estimate of him), was busy amongst the farmers, and came pretty frequently to the house. All

the rooms were once more opened to the light, and Mrs. Gabriel went hither and thither in her quiet task of setting everything in order, for Oswald had written a month before asking that all might be in readiness for him and for his bride.

Little had been known of his movements by Mrs. Gabriel, who had had only three or four letters at intervals and bearing foreign post-marks. He was travelling in company with Lady Flakestone and her daughter, and beyond occasional instructions to Harrick and a visit from Vivian Bullpoint, who came down in the family interest to see what was being done, little was known of the probable result of this companionship.

Vivian was evidently in high glee, although he thought it necessary to his diplomatic character to conceal his satisfaction under a calm and legislative manner. His interviews with Harrick were conducted entirely on this plan, and the deferential attitude of the steward was so eminently satisfactory that he began to feel quite an interest in the estate, and had already suggested several improvements on his own responsibility.

One of the most remarkable of the changes which had come upon Oswald, however, was the attention which he bestowed upon his own affairs. He had seen Sharp, and had had an interview with the bankers at Grundon, and had set all the accounts of his estate in order, before he left Fairhoe. If he possessed little of the keenness which belongs to the landlord, he certainly set himself to the task of acquiring it with

praiseworthy assiduity; and the directions left with Harrick respecting arrears and overdue payments of outstanding debts left that gentleman little leisure for several weeks. In truth, Oswald himself might easily have attained as much experience as was possessed by his steward, who, having never been employed in any but a subordinate capacity on the estate where his father was a bailiff, under the supervision of an agent, who was himself subject to the experience of an agricultural nobleman, had but a superficial knowledge of the duty required of him, and as the Fairhoe farmers declared at a market dinner, "know'd more about horses than he did about their feed, and was no better than a Jack-in-office, as ought to be taught where his head hung."

But if James Harrick had learnt little about the management of land in his undefined capacity of horse-breaker, stud-groom, trainer, gamekeeper, assistant-collector, and general hanger-on to the great house—or rather to the magnificent stables—at Leyburne, where the master recognised his existence only because he was a very useful fellow in the hunting season and had a sort of instinct in horseflesh, as well as being a bold and skilful rider—he had discovered what he believed was the secret of getting on. His system for attaining this desirable end was a combination of cool effrontery and untiring deference. The first belonged to his mental constitution; the latter to the control with which he mastered his own ruffianism, just as he might have managed a vicious horse.

When he had no interest to serve, and slackened the

curb upon his true nature, he was as desperate a bully as could be found even amongst the professional fraternity of the racecourse and the training-ground. But then he was a specious bully; one who by the habit of continued self-consciousness could feather a curse with a sneer, and so make it stick deeper and leave the barb to rankle. It is little to be wondered at that few even amongst his associates liked him; but some feared him, and many tolerated him because he was cleverer than they. He commanded the admiration which always attends the man who can get on, and seems to hold his own even with those who are immeasurably above him.

Getting on in his case meant not only success in obtaining money, though he was suspected of being able to put a good sum out at interest, and was believed to have a pretty heavy book on more than one sporting event each season; it meant the consideration he obtained from those distinguished visitors at Leyburne who were watched at a respectful distance by the outside tribe of helpers, stablemen, touts, loafers, and indescribables who are to be found whenever horses are the occasion of an assembly. Often when his sleek black head was seen to be bowed sideways with humble attention to the discourse of a sporting gentleman by whose side he rode to the field, or for whom he would stop to open a gate; or whenever his small-featured but handsome face set in that close black frame of whisker, and with the covert sneer on that full, impudent mouth, was subdued to an expression of respectful interest, he was noted and

admired by those upon whom he would exercise his vulgar arrogance, in order, as it seemed, to recompense his enforced servility to their superiors.

Does the reader wonder why it is necessary to dwell so long upon the character of this man? No reason can be given for it. No reason could be given by those who saw him for the first time why they turned to look at him again, except that, while they instinctively shrank from the boastful brutality of his face, they saw a sort of change in it; which, even beyond its own unattractively handsome lineaments, lured them to speculate upon what that change concealed.

People like the Duke and in a minor degree, Sir Langley Bullpoint were never troubled by this fancy. They saw the attentive retainer; the smart, good-looking inferior; and all else belonging to the man was beneath their notice; they forgot his existence in any other capacity. He knew it, and felt bitter hate and resentment swell in his heart—a resentment which, but for the strong motive of self-interest, would have led him to curse them openly, and to swear vengeance against their order. It was well for them that they did not know what was to be read under the drooping lids of those wary, furtive eyes at such times, or they would scarcely have felt easy as they rode with him through a lonely field, or heard him thundering past them to take a fence where he could have hurled them from their saddles, and left them stunned and mangled, by an unlucky accident.

It can easily be imagined that such a man, if he once gave way to an overwhelming passion, would shrink at

nothing which would advance it; that, when once the rein was given to any hot desire it would stop at no obstacle that lay in its way until its course was run.

He had had a wide fling of evil amidst the coarser vices, but he pursued his very dissipations with a calculating recklessness which preferred safe victims. The country town and even the village had grown disagreeable to him, if not dangerous; for his last achievement had been to ruin a wretched orphan girl, and to lash with all a man's strength her boy brother who reproached him.

This was but an episode which rendered his further stay at Leyburne unpleasant, especially as his father had warned him to remain no longer beneath his roof. A consuming fancy had taken hold of him—a passion which he felt would require all his caution lest he should betray it;—from which he felt that the only safety would be in flight, while he gloated over it secretly, wondering if by any means he might seek its accomplishment.

The object of it was Caroline Blamyre.

She had been more than once a guest at Leyburne, where her mother claimed a distant relationship with the Duke, and where she herself had been the leader of that bevy of fair amazons who ventured to the hunting-field. The rest rode round by the gates, or kept the road, only crossing the level fields where a narrow ditch would faintly try their equestrian skill; but she would often follow the hunt over the fences, and, breaking away from her companions with a

scornful laugh, show even some of the timid gentlemen the way.

Had she ever turned to look twice at the face of James Harrick as he held her stirrup or led across the country? She might have done so, even had it been in surprise at the mingled depression and audacity with which he had begun to speak to her; but it is doubtful whether she had noticed him or it except by a momentary raising of the eyebrows. She knew nothing of his position, and his prominent place amongst the guests in the hunting-season might have justified his assuming something beyond the manner of an ordinary groom. Possibly she regarded him for a moment with a feeble curiosity; but the distance between them was too great for her to speculate longer upon the meaning of his suppressed and yet eager look. She no more associated him or his looks in any way distinctly with herself than she would have shaken hands with her mother's footman. She possessed democratic and republican principles, sneered at aristocratic pretensions, and was a thorough theoretical advocate of equality and fraternity, and therefore would have looked with sublime surprise at any claim to either on the part of man or woman beneath her own rank who sought to illustrate it by a familiarity to which she had not first condescended.

James Harrick knew the difference between himself and her, and it gnawed his heart, fed the fierce flame of his mad fancy, and perhaps gave his insane passion the greater force by seeming to add to its lawlessness. If he had but possessed the means, he would have

carried her off by force from the hunting-field and transported her to some place where he could threaten her into submission. Some such wild notions had chased through his brain many a time, and he had heard of such things having been done—in Ireland especially: but he was a safe villain still; and even this consuming passion which he had suffered to take hold on him had not obliterated his regard for his own carcass or his fear of the penalty which already threatened him for his last exploit in reckless debauchery.

It was to avoid the reproach of the people of Leyburne, and perhaps with a dim intention of escaping from a place where he had too many associations of the same kind, that he sought a new service.

It may be imagined with what a shock—like that of some hidden wild beast, who, lying concealed, yet feels the swift bullet of the hunter—he learned that Caroline Blamyre would be Oswald Fairhoe's wife, mistress of the house of which he was the first servant. The intelligence made him giddy, sick, furious—affected him as such intelligence could only affect a man who had been brooding over an impossible crime, and, wishing it to be possible, had associated the object of his admiration only with the evil part of his nature.

For a day or two he remained shut up in his house; then he came out more quiet and subdued than he had been for months before. He had compressed his deranged thoughts into a scheme founded on the idle gossip of the village and the farmhouses, or such

scraps of it as he had overheard, for few of these confidences reached him. If he had only the devil's luck as well as his own, he held the first thread in his hand, from which, by patient waiting and plotting, he might spin a web round that haughty woman, and bring about—what? Well, we all know what the devil's luck is, and what it will bring to a man who can any way secure it. Harrick cared very little what it brought; he saw before him, in imagination, a woman whom he looked at with eyes that had hell fire in them; and her image was lucid with that same light, though it seemed to transform her into something angelic.

While all the household at Fairhoe was busy preparing for the return of the bride and bridegroom, the steward was sitting in his own room, with closed shutters and a shaded light, deep in consultation with an old acquaintance, Mr. Swiffle, who had turned up in quite a new character, not only as a chemist and apothecary, but as the substitute for a doctor to the Grundon workhouse, where the guardians had thought they might by employing him evade the necessity for engaging a regular medical man, and at the same time save quite half the salary which would have been demanded either by Doctor Sweetning or his partner.

It was nearly daybreak before these worthies separated, and then Harrick dashed his head into a great bowl of water, dressed as carefully as his rather extensive wardrobe would enable him to do, and went off to London by the coach. He had a swift horse waiting for him in a stable there to bring him back the same

day; but he had determined, for no reason that he could define, to be present at the wedding.

The ceremony took place in a fashionable London church—*the* fashionable London church; and it took two clergymen to perform it. The bride was splendid and imperious, the bridemaids and guests were all iced, haughty, brilliant, beautiful; carriages and appointments were characterised by that quiet splendour which belongs to real *ton*. The "families" were there, represented by their most distinguished members. Not a rosette on a coachman's whip, not a buckle of a horse's harness, but was equal to the occasion; but through all his quiet, self-contained manner—so still that it was almost deathlike—the bridegroom felt the touch of a vanished hand, heard the sound of a voice that was still. Through all the humming of the clergyman's voice it came; the clerk's responses were interrupted by it; and when at last that brilliant company knelt before the altar, there seemed to come upon the air the faint notes of the Grundon chimes—the ghost of those wedding bells which should have sounded so long ago, and rung a tune of hope and joy which had now no place for him on earth.

One other pale, silent spectator of the ceremony, who witnessed it not without emotion, thought of what might have been, and heaved a great sigh when he should have said "Amen."

It was Philip Ravel, who, turning to leave the church, saw a dark boding face looking from behind a pillar, and recognised the steward. At the porch he felt a hand upon his arm, and Harrick with his usual defer-

ential smile, asked him not to mention to Mr. Fairhoe that he had shown his respect by coming up to witness the wedding.

The sound of those phantom bells ceased when the register had been signed and the bridemaids, like a bevy of fair birds, had rustled their snowy plumage back to the carriages. More than one of them had observed, however, that Oswald started, turned pale, and glanced in a sudden, scared manner round the vestry before he placed his name upon the page. Did he expect a phantom of sight as well as of sound? Who can tell? The party already waited for him to lead the bride along the aisle; the horses champed and pawed impatiently at the porch; the crowd in the street had already begun to need the interference of the solemn beadle, who, assisted by two special policemen in attendance, kept the way open for the wedding-guests. Then, with a faint cheer from the front row of boys, with a clattering of hoofs, a clapping of doors, and amidst a faint perfume shaken from lace handkerchiefs and hothouse flowers, the cortége rolled away to the sumptuous breakfast at the house of the mother of the bride, where the reporter for the fashionable morning paper had already been admitted to view the table, and secretly taken out the back way by the attendant attached to the establishment of the celebrated Regent-street caterer who had prepared the feast.

Oswald had commenced quite early the rôle which he had set himself to play. All through that breakfast he was quiet, almost silent, rather preoccupied, but

steadily attentive, while his bride was, if possible, more haughty and imperious than ever under the influence of the reserve demanded by her situation. In her whole manner there was something so like contempt and repressed sarcasm that a prejudiced observer might have thought she despised herself and resented her own position upon those around her by a sort of cynicism which her mother regarded as almost profane.

Whatever may have been her thoughts, however, there was a triumphant look in her face whenever she glanced at Lady Flakestone. Her Ladyship was to go down to Fairhoe, there to await the return of the happy couple, and Mrs. Gabriel, to whom the younger lady had an ill-concealed dislike, was thenceforth to be set at liberty, to return to her own home. This was the first little difficulty which had to be settled in the morning, and Oswald had given way against his own inclination. He felt how he should be hemmed in, and how the very memory of his dead mother would be blotted out by this sudden dismissal of her sister. But he made only a faint resistance; to resist was no longer the business of his life; he would yield in all things possible, and so tread the dull path to which he looked forward. Not the most cheerful destiny to which a bridegroom could look forward on his wedding morn. Still he accepted it, and its influence was strong upon him when, at last, the breakfast was over, and, amidst a crowd of pink, champagny male faces, beaming from white waistcoats, and dazzling white hands waving adieux from clouds of lace and muslin, the close carriage bore him and his wife away to the

south, where they were to spend the honeymoon. James Harrick, hurrying from the church, and turning sharply round the corner of a by-street, had run against Ralph Fairhoe, who, unconsciously playing the part of the Ancient Mariner, held the steward with his eye until they were able to seek the concealment of a neighbouring tavern. It was late in the evening when Harrick rode swiftly on, sometimes urging his horse to his utmost speed, sometimes slackening the rein until he went only at a gentle trot; but, at whatever pace he travelled, the expression of his dark face seldom varied from that of sinister triumph and crafty hate. It was while he galloped down a narrow road, and as the deeper shadows were falling amidst the stunted trees by the hedge-side, that he came so suddenly upon two men as almost to ride over them. With a sudden cry the slighter of the two sprang aside, and, raising a long staff on which he had been leaning, brought it down upon the horse's flank; then, recognising the rider, darted after him, still flourishing the stick. At the moment that he diverged from the road, and while he tightened his hand upon the rein till he brought the horse upon his haunches, Harrick saw who was his assailant, and, with an oath, shortened his heavy riding-whip and bore down upon him.

"Keep off, you murderous hound!" he shouted. "I know you and all your vile tribe. I say I know you, you gipsy thief. It was you, then, who skulked about at the alehouse, and set all those tales afloat?"

The horse plunged and reared so that Rory Lee—for it was he—could get no chance to bring its rider to

the ground; and, indeed, he was in imminent danger, for Harrick had just turned half round in the roadway where the gipsy stood. He had already raised his whip, and in another moment would have brought it down upon the lad's head, when a sharp report rang from the opposite hedge, and the horse staggered and fell.

Before he could extricate himself from the stirrup, which, although he had flung himself off with the quickness of a practised rider, had held his leg, so that it had been bruised beneath the animal's weight, he heard the sound of retreating footsteps. Whatever may have been the intention of the shot, it had missed him and entered his horse's neck.

With bitter curses he saw the animal's eyes glaze, and then with the saddle and bridle on his arm, he limped along the path leading to the open road, and waited for the night coach.

"You should have let him bide, man," said Rory's companion, as they also emerged upon the road a mile or so nearer to London than the spot where the encounter had taken place; "what was the use of it?"

"The use," retorted the gipsy, fiercely, "why, to keep him from doing mischief for some time to come, at all events; you preach about my giving him a cracked head, and yet you'd have let his life out, Reuben. Why should you have fired, except you wanted to bring somebody down upon us, or to have kept us here in gaol, maybe on a charge of murder? They'd call it murder to make a hole in such as him."

"Pooh, it was the horse, not the man, Rory; there's no murder in killing a horse."

"I don't know that; I'd rather kill the man than the horse, 'twould be less of murder to my mind."

"Whether or not, 'twas to save you from his whip, and to give him something to remember us by when we're far away. That bit of horseflesh will have cost him a fifty if it cost a penny, and it's nought but dog's meat by this time, or I've lost the knack."

"How do you know he won't be after us yet?"

"Not a chance of it. He's hastening back to Fairhoe on some devil's business, as you might have seen by his face, and I shall be afloat and on my way to the other side of the world before he finds me."

CHAPTER XIII.

TIME THE CONSOLER.

A LAND of wonders! where everything is new and strange, but yet where everything is old and changing only with the slow progress of the ages. A land where Nature, waiting for man, wears her primeval robes and has not yet unlocked her treasures. A land of vast plains, entered by gates of lava, molten and cast in the hidden furnaces of great volcanoes now extinct for ever;—whose hollow craters no more vomit fire, but are turned into solitary lakes, where strange birds scream and drink, and where the trembling savage listens for the bellowing of unknown monsters said to haunt the depths.

A land of arid, boundless, treeless wastes, dotted with domelike mounds that lie like giant graves, and stretch far out of mortal sight to that lone desert where death waits, or comes to meet the heedless traveller half way.

A land of burning sands, whose blood-red ridges rise and fall in blinding endless lines that have their vanishing points in spaces too remote for even hope to follow them.

A land of deep, cool, moist thickets; of hot and

misty ravines; of great trackless forests, where the awful trees tower hundreds of feet above the tangled network of boughs and twisted stems which shrouds their mighty trunks, and where the ferns, with every leaf a tree, fill the deep plashy hollows of the water-courses.

A land of gorgeous woods, where every bough is odorous, and loads the air with the rich fragrance which the gorgeous flowers have lost; nay, where the trees themselves are flowers, their spreading branches all aglow with blooms and sparkling with vivid flashes from the painted wings of songless birds, whose hues are brighter than the scentless flowers.

A land of melancholy thickets, where the impenetrable scrub defends the hidden burial grounds of dead races; where bark of iron and leaves of bronze stand unchanged by the varying seasons in their threatening gloom.

A land where undulating hills of emerald turf, dotted with giant boles of shining silver sweep into velvet glades spangled with enamel blossoms, or bouquets of a thousand hues, set amidst ribbons of rivulets.

A land of mountain-slopes and valleys; of level pastures lost in the horizon; of far outlying huts, where solitary shepherds watch their swarming flocks; of plains, where half-wild herds start as the crack of stockmen's whips breaks the awful silence like a pistol-shot, and seems to stir the light but slumberous air.

A land of such wealth and enticing beauty, of such

vigour and repellent dearth, that men are blinded, staggered, intoxicated, filled with hope, crushed with despair, elated, ruined, astounded, before they begin to learn what has been saving for them there through countless years.

Sharon and Wilderness in one.

Australia!

A town where men, stuggling, depressed, confused, and living in a social chaos, have done their best under such conditions, first, to make themselves a resting-place, and then to improve it.

A town hewn out of a forest, on the verge of a mighty basin of the sea and at the confluence of rivers, and hewn out by men whose crimes had banished them to this new paradise, to which they brought their hell.

A town founded by a cargo of convicts, robbers, murderers, who robbed each other, fought, suffered, starved, and died, while the means of wealth and luxury lay unheeded, because they were to be secured only by patient labour.

A town which was first a mere collection of tents and wooden huts, where men, some of them worse than the savage natives who had in vain opposed their landing, took possession of the place, and afterwards looked with hungry eyes towards the sea for the supplies which they might better have secured upon the fertile soil.

A town where lawless riot grew to irrepressible licence, and the population dwindled with disease and famine; but where at length new cargoes, new

colonists, and a new and stronger Government laid new foundations for a better future, and men learnt that they might trust to Nature, who had been waiting so long to endow them with her hoarded wealth.

A town around which stray sheep and rams, wandering in the rich wide pastures, became progenitors of flocks which made their owners men of substance in a few short years; where animals, breaking from their few companions and given up as lost in the great feeding-grounds beyond, grew so in numbers in their fat retreat that they became a mighty herd, half wild and ownerless; where from a soil which had no exhaustive crops of its own, every grain and almost every fruit known to man would grow in rich profusion, and some of them all through the year; where hogs were fed on peaches, and the pale-green English apple could be gathered near the blood-red earthy, seedy pomegranate of Spain; where the sickle and the drill were never still, and harvest followed seed-time twice a year. Then, a town around which, instead of a wild forest, there stretched a pastoral country where rich allotments showed the lesson that the settlers had learnt, and stacks, sheds, fields, and homesteads, rough but amply found, and full of prosperous signs, lay here and there, the property of men who had been soldiers, sailors, convicts, as well as of those free settlers who had started with an allotment, a set of tools, and two years' provision and clothes.

Then a town where shops and houses formed themselves into regular patterns till they made streets; where roads branched out and suburban villas spread;

whence right through the territory one of these roads led to a passage across those deep blue mountains, beyond which some ambitious settlers longed to push.

At length a hot baking town of bare-faced unshadowed houses on the rigid British pattern, but built sometimes from their own foundations of sandstone; a town of two great wide streets, more than two miles long, and of smaller streets remarkable chiefly for their marvellous resemblance to English thoroughfares. A town the very approach to which from the sea is so like our own regulation British seaport, that the visitor is surprised to see even the few foreign elements which are so rarely discovered in its streets.

A town where a stray Chinaman, a lounging lazy brown-skinned emaciated native, whose woolly head stuck on his emaciated body, nods at a group of wretched *gins* who crawl to the door of a low tavern to beg for rum; where even an orange-tree in bloom, or the twittering of a flight of green parrots, is matter of surprise because of the contrast it presents to streets and houses which might have been transported, like some of their former architects, from Whitechapel or Wapping Wall.

But a town with some neat well-appointed dwellings, in the higher suburbs; a town where bread and meat are at a nominal price, and where flesh and blood are growing dear.

A town with all the anomalies of the young capital of a great and prosperous community.

Sydney!

But Sydney, more than a quarter of a century ago. A population of such varied elements that they can with difficulty mingle either in their tastes or pursuits in the town itself; but with such ample resources for labour and enterprise beyond it, that every man willing to work can find some place and keep it, if not in Sydney, in the bush, where the naked gum-tree helps to make a shelter, and the "laughing jackass" is merry company.

A population divided in one respect differently from that of any other community; forming, in fact, two classes, with the social station of which wealth has little to do; divided by a barrier which is neither that of birth, breeding, nor possessions: a barrier separating the "old hands" from the colonists.

The old hands, or, as they are more politely styled, the emancipists, are reformed, or, at all events, respectable convicts; men of wealth some of them, men of commerce, men of judgment and clear-headed enterprise; a few of them men of taste, fewer still men of education. Landlords of Sydney houses; farmers, horse-breeders, store-owners, Government contractors, building speculators, shipping agents, anything, and all things by which, with redeemed time and newly-directed energy and courage, men may thrive. Between them and the colonists there is a great gulf fixed and quietly acknowledged. On the mart, in the field, the counting-house, the farm, the store, the stockyard, merchants and men of business are with them on equal terms; but the intimacy extends no farther, and society is closed to the man whose iron will and dogged

determination, having once made him the leader of a gang and a desperate convict, has now, under a new régime and with open chances, rendered him a successful capitalist.

Among the ragged, brown, and bearded men who drive the herds, watch the sheep, or tend the lumbering waggons that supply outlying stations in the great bare flats, convicts and colonists may know no distinction, though the former may suddenly swerve away from all honest companionship, and prowl in the bush, solitary or in gangs, to rob and murder until they are shot down or hanged; but here, in the town and all around in farms and settlements, the separation is complete. Is it any wonder that the old hands, with wealth and luxury at their command, launch out sometimes into outward show—set up carriages and four on the pattern of the Governor's own equipage; dress their wives in satins in the forenoon; ride blood horses from the stock which they have bred for the Indian market; have conservatories and grand pianos, and butlers, and footmen in gorgeous liveries; and forgetting, or endeavouring to forget, Cockatoo Island and the chain-gang, live in a sort of isolated splendour seldom or never attained by their less wealthy and more exclusive neighbours?

Amongst the most respected, and the least flashy, as well as the "warmest," of these old hands was Dick Curtis. That was the name he went by; that was the name he signed to all his receipts and letters. There were those alive who remembered his landing with a gang of desperadoes—of whom he was the most trucu-

lent because the most self-possessed—and being sent to work in irons on what was afterwards the Paramatta-road; thence to Port Jackson and on the headlands, thence to Cockatoo Island—wherever wanted.

Often as he was tempted to endeavour to escape, Curtis steadily refused. He had a better game; so he told his companions, when they twitted him with cowardice and wanted to know what had crushed the spirit of Daredevil Dick.

If they escaped, what then? They must take to the bush; or, at best, make a run for some ship, where the officers would as like as not give them up. Suppose they got away, and back to England, what then?

From the flash ken of the thieves' kitchen to gaol, and from the gaol to Cockatoo Island again, with a life sentence, and no chance of emancipation? No, no! He had a better game.

One of his companions leaped into the sea loaded with heavy irons, and went down just as the sentry fired at him; another made a six months' reputation in the bush, and then was found dead in the high road, with a colonial clasp-knife in his heart and the marks of a sharp tussle where he lay; a third graced the gallows. Curtis bore chains and work, and bit his lips, and set himself to keep silence, until one day he received a ticket of leave, and heard that a Government officer was on the look-out for a stout, active, *honest* fellow for an odd man on his pleasure-farm just beyond Sydney. Who can tell what hidden springs operate on a human soul? Perhaps the "honest" did

it, but Dick Curtis never touched a crust of bread that was not his from that day; and, when at last he got an allotment of land, he had saved enough to begin to build up a fortune that afterwards seemed to grow rather than to be built.

He married his first master's dairymaid—a ruddy, good-tempered lass from Somersetshire—who fell in love with Dick's white teeth and black whiskers; but the Australian climate withered her, as it will wither some young, fair-skinned girls; and she died of a fever caught by a sudden chill from riding in an open carriage with her husband on the Heads after the prevalence of that hot storm of wind known to the Port Jacksonites as a "sutherly buster."

Curtis then lived alone, and his establishment in town was a modest one. He had greater attractions at his place "in the country," miles away from Sydney—the place where he first made his fortune, and where he felt fewer of the restrictions imposed on him by his former history.

A spacious homestead, strangely incrusted with rude outbuildings, and yet with a portion of the more modern building quite superior to an ordinary English farmhouse. A drawing-room, with French windows veiled with muslin curtains, and opening into a verandah; Indian ornaments, ivory chessmen, tables of inlaid wood, easy-chairs, couches, pictures, a silver tea-kettle, a collection of china, and a grand piano. Two sitting-rooms and three bed-rooms formed this part of the building, and all else was little better than the ordinary huts and shanties of poor Australian

settlers. These buildings, lying under a long, low roof, were the dwelling-rooms and sleeping-places of the men labouring on the farm. One peculiar, and indeed the main, feature of the whole establishment was a great high shed with a massy barred door; which was, in fact, a great store where waggoners, passing on their way to distant settlements, would call to purchase such necessaries as were required on the plains, or in the higher lands at outlying stations. Everything could be had for money, from a tin pannikin to a German flute; and pepper, salt, flour, shoes, clothing, firearms, Bibles, and song-books were to be found in the wide bins and closets with which the place was fitted.

Entered from the rough, uneven road by a broad space inclosed with a rude fence and a pair of heavy gates, the store stood a little apart from the farmyard, where, however, the clatter and cackle of pigs, poultry, and cattle could be distinctly heard as the sound of approaching hoofs roused the inmates of the barns and sheds. This whinnying, grunting, and general animal clamour seemed to be louder than ever in the still air of a bright, warm, summer's night early in December; for the noise of a horse's hoof sounded in the farmyard itself, and a square-built, sunburnt, grizzled man, long past the prime of life, but looking hale and strong, hitched his bridle over an iron stanchion in the fence and went towards the house. He halted a little on one foot, as if some past accident had left him lame; but he was upright, and a half-melancholy smile flickered on a firm, resolute mouth,

and seemed to soften features unusually stern and heavy.

"Ah, Ma-a-sta Waine!" said a long-legged "corn-stalk," or colonial youth, emerging from the stables and speaking with a drawl that might have carried the visitor's imagination to Suffolk, "we've been looking out for you these two days; there's some un inside you'll be glad to see, too, I should say."

"The waggon won't be here till to-morrow, Abel. I went with it to Sydney, and rode back first that I might get home, please the Lord, before mid-day. But if Mr. Curtis is here I'll perhaps stay the night."

"Mr. Curtis aint here, sir; he set off, let me see, oh! at seven o'clock this morning for your place. I shouldn't like to do such a journey myself hardly in a day; but he meant to get there before nightfall, he told me. He's on Black Jack, so that if horseflesh can do it he'll be there to supper; if not he'll stop at the Gulley till morning. No, it's Mr. Paterson that's here, sir: came down with master from yonder, and goes back to-morrow."

A tall, crisp-haired, brown-bearded man stepped to come under the low doorway, and held out his hand to the visitor with such a bright light in his eyes that it needed no words of welcome.

"Why, Curtis has gone over to your place and must ha' gone to his journey's end by this time," he said, with a Scotch accent which was evidently little more than a wilful assertion of nationality. "Have ye no passed him on the road?"

"No, I'm just from Sydney, Mr. Andrew. And your

good father, how is he? I wish he'd come over and stay with us in this fine summer weather. I want to ask him about some sheep, too, for I'm thinking of adding a flock. Not but what I've done well with cattle hitherto, and it might seem like a tempting of Providence; but a neighbour on Fossett's run, about forty miles off me, wants to sell, and there's nobody thereabout will take his lot. At all events, I wish my good old friend would come. There's Barbara wants his advice, too; and I need to talk sometimes to such as him, Andrew. He's of the elect, I verily believe, though his doctrines have a strangeness to them that have thought, perhaps, too much on the dark side of judgment and not enough on the bright side of loving-kindness. Come, I'll tell you what you shall do. I'll ride back with you to Sydney, and then he shall go back with me. Can he bear the ride in the light chaise, think you?"

"I think so; and I know he'd be glad to come; but he's just growin' old, and wearin' away to the lan' o' the leal; not fast, but leisurely and calmly. So you must be careful of him," replied the younger man, with the same bright smile. "I doubt if he'll venture to give you advice about sheep here, though, for he says he don't understand this upside-down country, and that is one reason why he lives with me at Sydney ever since our kinsman's death."

"And shall you stay in Sydney, Mr. Andrew? Shan't you go into some business of your own? You don't look at service with my eyes, I know. I was in the house of bondage for years, and I couldn't bear to

come out here to another land of Egypt. Thanks to Curtis for all his kindness, for by God's help and his I have prospered and laid out my money well, when I might have lost it all those years ago, or have been thrown ashore without a penny or a friend?"

"Eleven years ago," muttered the young man, thoughtfully, "what a short time, and yet what a long time it seems to look back upon; how much, and yet how little has happened since the day when we stood together on that island of birds and saw the whaler put off her boat, and knelt down, hand in hand; to think how near we had been to death! No, I don't think I shall leave Curtis's—*service*," he added, with a slight flush. "He never expects me to call him Master. He trusts me as Potiphar trusted Joseph; and, as he has no wife to make mischief between us, I don't know that I could do better than as his manager at Sydney, just as you might have been his manager here. I never took kindly to farming, Mr. Waine, and I like to live where I can look at the sea, and watch the ships, and feel the salt breeze on my face. There's something briny in my blood, I suppose, and I prefer biscuit and beef to mutton and damper."

"Talking of wives," said Waine, scarcely heeding the latter part of his companion's remark, "I'm not very sure, Andrew, that Curtis hasn't one in his head. What should have taken him to my place so often lately, if he hadn't some notion of that sort? It can't be to see me that——. Why, Andrew, what's the matter?"

He may well have asked, for Paterson was leaning forward in his chair, where they were sitting by the open window of the lower room, and his lips were trembling, while his eyes stared widely at his questioner.

"What's the matter, Andrew? Surely there's nothing very hurtful in his thinking that way if he has a fancy, and Mrs. Bailey's not so young as a widow but she might do worse than listen to him."

"Mrs. Bailey!" ejaculated Paterson. "Oh, yes; of course, poor woman, I wasn't thinking of her at the moment, I confess."

Waine looked at him earnestly, and a slight cloud fell upon his face as he noted the young man's reddening brow, but he said nothing.

"I remember, now, that he has always been very anxious that Mrs. Bailey should want for nothing, and that her boy should be no burden to you," resumed Paterson, recovering himself; "how is the bairnie? He was baptised to the sea that awful night, and both he and his mother seem to belong to us all someway."

"The lad's a rare bold curly-headed little fellow, Andrew, and such a bonny child that I don't wonder at his mother clinging to him so, when she heard she'd no husband to meet her after that weary journey across the seas, and almost into the jaws of death. As you say, she and the bairn belong to us all, and they shall never part from me and mine while I can help it, unless Curtis is really of the mind I think he is. Barbara, too, would never have been the woman she is but for that good soul, and the child that they

loved between 'em. She would never have found such rest and peace even as she has found but for them."

"Time is a great consoler," said Paterson, vacantly. He was leaning with his chin upon his hand, and with such an expression of yearning inquiry on his face that had his companion been looking up he must have noticed it; but Waine was gazing far away at the scrub and trees in the bush, and the cloud had settled more darkly on his face before he turned and saw those earnest eyes fixed upon him.

He laid his hand gently on the young man's arm. "Andrew," he said, as the shadow on his brow seemed to clear a little, "not from what you have said, but from what I have seen, and because you will not often be our guest, I have guessed what you have hidden in your heart, like a brave good man. I am honoured by it, and *she* is honoured by it. Let that rest. God knows how willingly I would have given her to you had she been mine to give; for I am an altered man in many things since the Lord's dealings with me, and have changed many dark and despairing views that I was once bound by. I may owe that to you and yours as instruments to such an end—let that rest, too. You know part of Barbara's secret, Andrew?"

The young man bowed his head.

"You know that she is married?"

"Yes; and deserted by her husband; is it not so?"

"No; but they kept the marriage secret for his sake, and I knew nothing except that I was dragging her away from a hated connection that might work

ruin for them both, until one night when we stood together in the cabin before the ship went down. Afterwards she told me all, and, in the face of death, we strove to absolve each other, though I can never absolve myself."

"Why do you not take her back, or at least send some message that will urge him to come? Who and what is he?"

"His name is Oswald Fairhoe, and it was to his grandfather and his father that I served in the bondage that I spoke of—a proud, bad race. One might hope that it had seen its last, unless my daughter's child still lives; and those who had it in charge can give no tidings of it."

"And he—will he come?"

"I think not. Barbara has written, once from the sea, when she had no thought of seeing his face again; once since; but there is no answer, and she will never go to seek him. He left her without aid or message when she sent to him to claim her from me before our voyage, and twice again in all these years that she has waited to prove his truth. We never shall go back now, Andrew," he whispered, hoarsely; "we cannot go back to disgrace; better as it is—far better as it is."

"What disgrace?" returned Paterson; "what disgrace? He would not dare disown her."

"I don't mean that," replied Waine; "but you should know all, though I must keep this knowledge from *her*. He has married another. I saw it in an English newspaper at Sydney years ago, and have

kept the secret since. Let it die; she would be only more unhappy for learning it. Show me where I may sleep, Andrew, and let me take back your father with me to-morrow."

So they parted for the night; but the young man returned to the window, and sat there until the stars came out, and shone in the traces of the tears that fell upon his red-brown cheeks and trickled down his tangled beard.

Yes, Time, the consoler, had dealt gently with poor, tender Barbara, and had turned her into a stronger woman than her youth had promised. The rose tint had faded from her complexion, and only the hue which the piercing Australian sun had made, took its place; her deep blue, lustrous eyes were still radiant with some gleams of the light of love, if not of earthly hope; and her golden hair shone like a web of summer sunlight, made a deeper gold by the ardent rays that fell upon it. Yes, she seemed to have mellowed rather than to have faded in those years that had passed between her and her great sorrow; though there was still, as she believed, one secret that she held from her father, and only one—the news of Oswald's marriage. So each kept it from the other, for the other's sake.

"I wonder you like to leave Barbara so long alone in such a wild place as yours," said Andrew, when he met Silas Waine on the following morning at breakfast. "You have trustworthy men about the place, of course?"

"Half a dozen or more, and Mrs. Bailey and the

boy, and two women folk," said Waine. "But I must tell you of a strange thing that happened to us six or seven years ago. My daughter was standing at an outer door, near the gate where the sheep are driven into the pens at night—standing, as she does in the eventide, looking right away towards the great plain where the sun sets so red and low. I'd bought a lot of cattle a week before, at a station many miles away, through a man that I trusted, and they were to be driven up that very night. One of my people came riding in to say that they were on the road, with a couple of stockmen pushing them along to get them home before dark; and I went out to see; when, just as I reached the gate, I heard Barbara cry out; and there, standing talking to her, were two strangers. One of them, a brown, brawny fellow, with a beard that hung right down upon his breast, was dressed all in hide and leather, and carried a heavy stock-whip. I had never seen him before that I knew of, though he called me by my name; but Barbara called out, 'Father, father! It's Reuben—Reuben Rooke.' And, sure enough, it turned out to be a poor fellow, a farrier, travelling tinker, what-not, brother to that very woman, half-gipsy as I think, who had the care of——you know. The man stayed with me, and is with me now, for I want Curtis to take Reuben Rooke and fit him up a forge here at the farm. He'd be worth his weight in gold."

So Silas, in the ease of heart which comes of the confidence that shares a sorrow with a friend, chatted on, as they rode back to the town. He little knew how

the man he spoke of had travelled far and wide to seek him and his daughter, nor that on that very evening when they met he had urged her to return, and placed in her hands a paper, such as he had seen in Sydney, announcing Oswald's marriage with Caroline Blamyre, and containing a long account of the ceremony and the dress of all the bridesmaids.

CHAPTER XIV.

TIME THE AVENGER.

TIME, who had dealt so gently with some of the persons connected with this history, had not forgotten others.

Those who are not mellowed, ripened, sweetened as the sands fall softly through his hour-glass are stricken with his scythe and drop worthless and withered, or hang with a blight upon them that eats slowly to the very core.

The few silvering hairs, the increasing stoop, the added lines and furrows on familiar faces, may have come almost unnoticed in their gradual approach; and yet each one of us, in his inmost heart, can feel the footprints left by the retreated months, and know that they have exacted something in exchange for their most cherished gifts.

It is good for us to know that Time claims least of all from those to whom he has brought love. Whoso bears the burden of life and knows that love lies there, like Joseph's golden cup in the sack of Benjamin, feels but little of its weight, and yet loses none of its treasure; for love supplies far more than ever strong-limbed Time can take away, though he be helped by Sorrow.

Even for those for whom he leaves a catalogue of bitter memories and a load of self-reproach, he offers help and healing if they will only heed his silent, solemn teaching; but he will not be neglected unavenged. The man who strives to evade the mute reminder of the hourglass will feel the scythe, and through all the armour that he may bind upon his breast it will strike him deeply. It was so with Oswald Fairhoe, from whom the vanished years had seemed to take all that he could care to lose, as conquerors will spoil a coward who has yielded treacherously.

That quiet, supine existence which he had promised himself had never come. The dead, unloving, and so unvexed and colourless life which he had fancied, could not be: dead hopes, dead memories, dead interests, but a living remorse was what he found in its stead. A calm, quiet, routine of daily occupations only hid a gnawing sense of unrest; a methodical deference and assiduous attention took the place of the love that he had profaned by a lying promise when he swore to have and to hold his wife till death should part him from her; a dogged quietude, a forced seclusion to the life that he had set himself, scarcely hid the haggard eyes and the weary care with which he sometimes met his haughty lady.

She herself had noticed it, but had long before given up much care in the matter; had set it down to natural hypochondria—to a nervous temperament—to the want of that change which he would so seldom seek in the society where she bore herself so proudly and so well.

He was her husband; and by that word she meant that he fulfilled an official position towards her which was convenient and highly satisfactory. She even admired him sometimes a little, liked his quiet assiduous attentions, contrasted him not unfavourably with other men, left him to the quiet round of days and the cares of the estate which principally occupied him, and generally regarded him as a very eligible appanage to the position to which she had always looked forward. Other people took their tone from her; and even the county families who came to the grand, solemn parties that she held twice a year at Fairhoe regarded her as the head of the family which was so traditionally proud that its distinguishing attribute found in her its fitting representative. Oswald Fairhoe, Esq., was Mrs. Fairhoe's husband, and therein lay his distinction.

This suited her, and even he preferred it; but yet there were times when she pondered on his quiet, self-suppressed habit, and sought some meaning in those signs of a deep anxiety which showed themselves so often in his face and manner.

She might never have speculated upon the subject but for the first shadow of a suspicion that came upon her, long after their marriage.

She had, it is true, heard some slight allusion to Barbara Waine, and to her father's departure from Fairhoe; but the whole circumstance was of no interest to her at the time; and, even if it had been, the passing fancy of a schoolboy for one whom she regarded as a sort of dairymaid would have given her no

uneasiness, especially as she had never heard any scandal in relation to it.

Lady Flakestone had never alluded to the subject; and, as she lived at Fairhoe for the greater part of the year, she might have heard all the particulars; whatever she had discovered, however, she carefully concealed from her daughter, and both Oswald and his wife were too much occupied with themselves to observe the quick, inquiring looks with which the Dowager sometimes regarded the faces of one and the other as they sat quiet and self-absorbed amidst the shadows of the long drawing-room.

At last her ladyship took her leave; for, as she said, she was a creature formed for society, and wanted to go back to town to get a little life into her, after those dull Fairhoe woods, which were very well for newly-wedded lovers, but were dreary for an invalided elderly lady, who naturally required change.

She had been out nearly every day during her stay, and had formed quite a high appreciation of her son-in-law's steward, in whose praise she frequently occupied a good deal of the conversation after dinner, and who had sometimes accompanied her in her excursions, driving her in a high-wheeled and swift but easy chaise which belonged to him.

It was while she launched forth into commendation of James Harrick that she bestowed those keen, inquiring glances upon her auditors. Her daughter had observed this, and had once or twice indolently bantered her on her "innocent young protégé;" at the same time expressing some satirical wonder at her

choice of his companionship. She was still more surprised, however, on the day of Lady Flakestone's departure, when that lady drew her aside, and said, "Caroline, you don't rely much on my judgment, I am aware; but if you should ever find it necessary or convenient to make any inquiries or to ask any advice in reference to, to—the estate, or even to, to—the family or your husband's affairs, I'm sure that you couldn't do better than apply to your steward there."

Harrick was at that moment standing by the carriage door, and as her mother spoke of him his face was turned a little upwards towards the window at which they were talking. It wore its usual smooth, deferential look, and yet there was a repressed defiance in it if any one had observed it closely—defiance and a sort of triumph in those false, shifty eyes. Mrs. Fairhoe looked from him to her mother with astonishment.

"What should I have to inquire about," she asked, "that I could not learn of Oswald, if I chose?"

"Oh! nothing of course; but if anything should occur, or any rumour reach you—you know such things do sometimes—that you wouldn't care to—to worry your husband with, really I should most earnestly recommend, indeed, I must entreat you to go at once to Mr. Harrick."

"Whatever do you mean, mamma?"

"Nothing, nothing, my own, but really I'd do so if I were you; he's the most considerate and confidential sort of person really, and, indeed, he made me promise this for you; or, at least, I mean that I *did* promise

it, not that there'll be any necessity, I dare say. Good-bye, my dear; I'll send up the lace by the coach, and then if you think you'd like Madame Fliffande to come down to measure you, you can write to me in town. Good-bye; there's that dear, good Oswald waiting in the passage to take me down stairs, and I've been gossiping here."

Mrs. Fairhoe said good-bye, and followed her mother and her husband into the hall, where she stood with lowering brows, wondering what advice she could ever possibly have to ask of that half-bred man, who, she remembered, had so often ridden by her side, or had waited for her at the gates when she was out with the hounds at Leybourne. In another minute she had dismissed the subject, and with a slightly sarcastic laugh, and coming to the conclusion that Lady Flakestone had really reached the age when ladies become mysteriously garrulous, went in to dress for dinner.

The subject which had suggested these reflections had passed from her thoughts as her maid was busy with her toilette. She had sat opposite her husband at the table; had been waited on by the footman who was specially devoted to her service; had joined in the short spasms of conversation; and, at last, having to drive to Grundon, had retired, leaving Oswald to his coffee, when Lady Flakestone's remarks of the morning were suddenly recalled to her, as though they had been flashed in lightning on the wall of the passage where she was standing.

"I don now about that, Martha; from all I've heerd lately, as well as when old Master Waine was here, his

daughter wasn't that sort as 'ud go so far without bein' lawful married. But whether master knows where the child was put to, or whether she made away with it afore she went away, nobody can't tell—at least, none o' them that's a tattlin' about it now, though may be there's them as could say a good deal if they liked."

"I dessay you might tell as much as some, Ann?"

"I might, or I mightn't; but I ain't one for to go an' gossip about such things, as goodness knows what harm might come of it here, when *she* don't o' course know nothing. What for ever these tales comes up for all of a suddint I can't tell, for the life o' me. But I musn't stay no longer; I heard Missis Fairhoe ring for coffee ten minutes ago, and she'll be up here in a jiffey and want waitin' on, so I'll just go an' send up her maid. I love to plague *her*, too, for the fine airs she gives herself, though she was nothing to what old missis's woman was—that there Mittens, she were a cat, and ain't come to no good, I warrant, wherever she is—them sort's generally found out in the long run, thanks be."

The speaker, who was no other than the cook, here left the room, which was one adjoining that at the door of which Mrs. Fairhoe stood. Fortunately, the woman's face was turned the other way as she came out, or she must have seen her mistress, who stood there as though she had been suddenly struck into a statue, with her clenched hand pressed upon her lips.

Was this what her mother meant, then, when she gave her that parting advice? and was her husband's

steward to be her adviser in such a matter? She could die first!

And, after all, what was the gossip of servants, made up of mere lying guesses, to her? This girl, Barbara Waine, was one of themselves, and they would feel some pride in making her and her affairs of great importance. She wished that she had heard a little more about it before her marriage, too. A serious liaison with a person of this sort, and perhaps a living proof of it in the person of a child, was a matter of more importance than a mere boyish passion.

Should she speak to Oswald himself about it? How could she bring up the subject of a country wench with whom he had a low amour long ago? She was too angry, too proud, too contemptuous, to let him see that such a report could influence even her passing curiosity. The girl, she had heard, was dead. Somebody had told her so: who was it? It must have been Mr. Ralph Fairhoe, who had come down to pay them a visit on their return from the wedding journey.

It was in reference to the new steward that that conversation had come up, and Ralph had praised Harrick, saying that he believed he was likely to be very useful, from his knowledge of horses and because he was a quiet fellow, who knew his place and had been a confidential servant. She remembered now that she thought at the time how the man's looks belied him sometimes, if that were his real character; but she had dismissed the subject from her mind, especially when she saw only a slight passing shade

upon her husband's face at the mention of Barbara Waine's death. Should she write now and ask Ralph Fairhoe to tell her something of her husband's past history? No; she would wait and see whether any opportunity of information arose. Could she only learn what had really become of the child?

It would have been well if she could have fallen into the apathy or indifference after which she seemed to strive; but, as striving means feeling, indifference does not come that way. Hers was no numb soul; it was very keenly sensible of any pain, slight, insult, doubt, or distraction that affected it, or turned it from its usual swift, proud impulse. Above all, it resented anything that removed it from the first place in the consideration of all those on whom it had a claim.

Ralph Fairhoe, coming over on a visit in a week or two, noticed that a cloud deeper than the habitual shade of pride and ennui dwelt upon her face. He saw it at once and noticed, too, that Oswald, though he had observed no change in his wife, was more moody and abstracted, and yet more nervously excitable, than he had been on his previous visit. The last three years had made but little change in Ralph Fairhoe. Except that his hair had whitened, and that he wore gold eyeglasses—two alterations which added to the respectability of his appearance, and accorded with a slow, thoughtful manner that had grown upon him, or that he had successfully assumed—he was no older. People who knew him attributed his quiet, almost pensive, air to the absence of his daughter, who still

remained abroad, having, it was understood, joined some acquaintances of whom her father could not altogether approve, though he had taken care to commit her to the watchful charge of an old friend of his family.

The truth was that Amina had gone to Paris on a very small allowance, and lived in the queer society of the circle usually found at Mdme. Piton's boarding establishment—that same Mdme. Piton with whom she had lived when she was a child, and who now welcomed her as an eligible addition to her establishment, even at half price, on account of the attraction she exercised by her face and accomplishments over the most profitable of Madame's connection. What would have become of the assembly after dinner, when the boarders had left their *petit vin* for the simpler delight of coffee, eau sucrée, and anisette, if Amina should suddenly depart now that she had established the superiority of Mdme. Piton's, and had withdrawn half the best customers from that tiger, the widow Pompette, over the way? The widow Pompette was round, plump, rosy, and had inveigled many of the most liberal, but at the same time the most foolish male boarders, who, my faith! sat at table with little appetite, watching the cherry-coloured ribbons of her lace cap and the artful curls of her jet black wig. Mdme. Piton said it was a wig, and perhaps it may have been; but the widow Pompette retaliated through a young artist, who, in payment of three weeks' board and lodging, produced a caricature of the Piton, with her lean figure, her wry neck, her long nose, and the

faint shadow of a beard which had begun to show upon her chin.

To the infuriate and almost desolated lady this might have been the final blow, when there arrives this beautiful, this charming, this angelic Mdlle. Farreau; and behold, as by a miracle—whiff!—away fly the boarders, the loungers, the scoffers, from that tigerous Pompette, and rally round the well-cooked, succulent dinners of La Mère Piton. Even the artist applies for rest and restoration, but is sternly refused; he and some others, who are of doubtful payment and not of the best *ton*, which has always distinguished the Salle Piton, are relegated to the widow, of whom Madame for ever mocks herself.

"It must be a great sacrifice to her father to lose her," say one or two ladies of the Piton company, who hear more or less—generally a great deal more—of the splendid position occupied by Amina in the salons of the *père veuf*. Amina herself says nothing, but she smiles sadly and grimly, and with a smouldering fire in her eye. For these three years she has been in London only twice, and on each occasion has watched a certain carriage, wherein sat a handsome, haughty lady and a pale, melancholy, but subdued gentleman, at both of whom she has shaken her clenched hand, and has then put the sea between herself and them. More than six months of every year are spent in Paris in that dull boarding-house in a back street, amongst dowdy people, and in the smell of French mustard and thin soup, and that part of the year is during the London season.

But it is not with Amina that this history has now to do. When the narrator has finished this last chapter of his own, he leaves the stage to the hero of the piece.

It has been already said that Mrs. Oswald Fairhoe hesitated to ask questions of her husband's uncle. She bore many tortures before she could bring her mind to it; tortures which came less from that sleeping devil of suspicion which had been so suddenly and strangely awakened, than from a morbid curiosity, which, joined to the languid contempt that she had always felt towards Oswald, had made her despise herself to think that her mistrust should seem so like jealousy.

So Uncle Ralph coming one day to dinner, and Oswald having gone down to see the horses saddled for a morning's ride, she began to talk, leading not very skilfully up to the question.

Ralph saw that she had heard something, and was less surprised than he would have been if he himself had not called on James Harrick on his way to the hall on the previous night. Whatever may have been that gentleman's reasons—and he did not divulge them entirely—Ralph had understood that he knew his nephew's secret with regard to Barbara Fairhoe, and that he had a game to play for which he required assistance.

Ralph himself was a little staggered when he heard the steward declare that he believed Oswald was really married to the woman who had tried to go to the other side of the world to avoid him, and

had died on that long journey; but it was just possible, and in such a case who could have a greater interest than Ralph himself in discovering whether that child was dead too? Then nothing would stand between him and the Fairhoe estates but his nephew's life—a life not worth much surely, when he learned that his awful secret was known, and that Lady Flakestone's daughter was—why, surely some man would be found who would make the cause his own quarrel, and would, for the sake of Caroline Blamyre, put a bullet into Oswald, just as Flasher Skidd would have done years ago, but for that cursed folly of Amina, which had, it seemed, never left her.

Now, if anybody else, for some reason that he neither knew nor would inquire about, chose to accomplish Oswald's ruin, and to find this child, and so give Ralph Fairhoe back the chances for which he had passed almost a lifetime of bitter, futile longing—would bring about an event for which he had already waited in vain, and which his nephew's birth frustrated; he would do anything in a quiet way to help on the evil work. He would do nothing professedly for that end; he had grown so respectable now, that he avoided open and avowed misdoing just as he had quite early in his career abandoned the danger of cogged dice and hidden trumps.

No! Some man had a motive which led him to expose Oswald's real position. Whatever the means employed, or whatever the end sought, it was nothing to him; let the other man settle that with his conscience. And as for Caroline Blamyre—well, his own

daughter might have been in her place, and should have been, but for Oswald's treachery. If Amina had been so situated, would any one have pitied her? Would the Flakestones, the Bullpoints, or any of the noble circle which ministered to his late sister-in-law's remorseless pride? No! At the best, and if Amina had been discovered to have been only the second Mrs. Fairhoe, that discarded child would have been found and taken care of, and made a means of humbling her and him. If he could do the same, he would. To find the infant, or to learn something certain of its fate, was what he desired. Only three people were likely to know much of it. Marion Rooke, whom he had not seen since she became Mrs. Letsom—one or other of the gipsies, and Mr. Swiffle.

The gipsies Harrick had driven away, and cursed himself for his folly now it was too late; cursed himself for not having propitiated Rory Lee and that wild tinker fellow who had brought him to grief on the night when he rode from Oswald's wedding.

Ralph had seen Swiffle at the steward's cottage on the night before, and that slouching apothecary, who crouched before Harrick like a beaten hound, knew nothing and had somehow learned from Mr. Letsom that Marion knew no more than he did.

If the affair had been in London he might have put Filmey on the scent, and he would have nosed out intelligence even from the slenderest data; but what was the use of Filmey in the country? Beside, Filmey had a horror of gipsies, and, for some unexplained

reason, could never hear them mentioned without curses. It was the one weakness of Filmey's professional life—a hatred for and, some folks swore, a fear of gipsies.

It was while actually pondering these things that Ralph felt his niece-in-law's hand upon his arm as he stood in the window of the long drawing-room, and it was with quite a shock that he heard her say—

"I have a reason—not a very important one, but a reason—for asking you whether you knew anything of my husband's relation to those people, the Waines? The father was steward here, I believe, and the daughter lived with him at the cottage yonder."

"Relation!" replied the astute Ralph, with a slightly altered countenance, however. "Ah, hum; let me see; I think that the father, Samuel Waine, wasn't his name? no, not Samuel, Silas—curious name to christen a lad—Silas married a sort of second cousin, or was it second niece, of my father's. They weren't always in that position, you know; the Waines had actually a very good property, I've heard. Not much of a relation, though, husband of third cousin; but Waine was a scoundrel, I'm afraid. I was compelled to warn my father of him; and, had I been the head of the family instead of my poor brother, I'd never have kept such a man on the estate. Quite a mistake to take any interest in him, really."

It was surprising how Ralph's hatred of the steward survived so many other likes and dislikes in this battered old villain's soul.

"You know I don't mean that," said his niece-in-

law, with her sudden imperious manner, and looking him full in the face—an operation always exceedingly unpleasant to Ralph Fairhoe. "You have heard, of course, all the scandal and gossip about Oswald when he was quite young;—you know we're quite old married people now," she added, with a scornful laugh;—"when he was a good deal younger, and this young woman lived here; they even say that their intimacy went beyond mere boyish love passages, and that she had a child. Nay," she added, with the crimson flush deepening in her face and rising to her brow, as her anger and impatience, so long suppressed, had begun to find scope in words, "I've heard more lies than that; I've heard ——. Never mind," she added, suddenly restraining herself by a great effort; "I want you to tell me how much of this is true, or if it is all the invention of these rustic gossips, of which the place, and even the house, seems to be full."

She looked so wrathful in her beauty that Ralph shrunk from her. "Surely you're not jealous because of an idle tale, or from having overheard some servants' gossip?" he muttered.

"Jealous! Of whom? Not of her, I hope? Not of him, surely? They would be a charming pair to provoke jealousy, truly!"

Her fury had the upper hand again, and she seemed to forget that she spoke of her husband, and of one that, at the best, was suspected of having been the mere plaything of his idle fancy.

"Then why do you wish to ascertain the truth or falsehood of a mere story, that can matter nothing

either way. Other men have done the same, even if it should be true; and other women have suffered or been paid, and other children sent out to nurse. Let it alone."

He was really giving her very good advice without precisely intending it. Happy might it have been for her had she acted on it.

"I will know more of this," she said, clenching her hand with a gesture of menace. "If you will not tell me I'll ask elsewhere; but I will know what truth there is in it, and that may help me to understand my lord's dumb, meek, quiet ways, and to know the secret that so evidently weighs upon him."

She had nursed this cursed suspicion until it had risen to full-grown mischief. Her eyes flamed, and by the light that shone in them, the light of distrust if not of hatred, she sought to read her husband's heart.

"This dull, weary place stifles me," she said, in a harsh voice; "it would be enough to bear even with a devoted partner and a brilliant companion, but with this miserable secret in the air, I choke under it, and I must learn how soon the air may be cleared so that I can breathe again."

"I wouldn't, if I were you, give any colour to these ugly stories, if they are really more than mere gossip," he said, without taking his half-closed eyes away. "You can't expect me, of course, to enter into them. I never lived at Fairhoe after my father—after my father's—a—a—death; and, of course, know no more than you do of such reports. If you really mean to

ask such particulars there is nobody who could tell you better or whom you could speak to more in what you may think a confidential manner than your own steward—your manager here, James Harrick. He'll know, if any one does, what is the likeliest version of such reports." Ralph had taken this cue the night before. "I really can't advise you or give you any information myself," he added, as he bowed and walked towards the door. "I'll just go and see after the horses. I dare say Harrick will attend us."

Long after he had left the room she stood as she had stood on that night at her chamber door listening to the talk of the two servants.

"He knows all about it," she said to herself, "and my mother knows; and both of them leave me to ask counsel or seek information of—of *that* man."

She felt that she had begun to hate Harrick, and when, at length, she went down, dressed in her habit, and saw the same look in his face that she had noticed there before; when, in the course of their ride, Ralph and her husband pushed on to look at a spot where some timber had been felled, and the steward, riding by her side, regarded her with a sudden boldness of admiration which made her bite her lips with anger, she wished that she could strike him dead. She began to fear him, somehow. She, who had laughed at men's strength and sneered at women's weakness, felt, in that crafty, strong, evil, handsome face, a power that made her shrink, until, to escape from the influence, she cut her horse smartly with her riding-whip, and the creature, who had been long unused to

such a reminder, sprang aside and began to gallop madly down the narrow road.

The danger and its excitement gave her a fresh impulse, and seemed to rouse her to healthy action; for she was an accomplished horsewoman. She had almost lost power over the reins, and was being carried on at a furious pace; and yet she would not try to stop, for she heard the thundering of hoofs behind her, and knew that the man she dreaded was riding to her rescue. She even raised her whip to warn him back, and would have brought it down again to urge her horse to still madder speed. The ride was a chase rather than a rescue, and she would have ridden to her death; but before the whip came down Harrick shot past her, and, heading away, crossed and recrossed the road at an awful pace, which must have brought any ordinary rider to grief. Another moment, as it seemed, and he was by her side again, her rein in his hand; his arm round her to keep her from falling, as he brought both horses up by an effort which left his dark face bloodless, and caused him to bite his lip so that his white teeth were edged with blood.

She had shaken herself loose from him, and had sprung to the ground before her husband came up. Both he and Ralph had pressed forward at the sound of the hoofs clattering on the stones, but they had heard no cry, not even when, at a turn of the road, they saw those two flying figures, and were uncertain whether Harrick would gain the fearful race. Then Oswald gave his horse the rein, and left his uncle

behind. He came up to find his wife pale and almost speechless, but with the old proud, defiant look in her eyes; with her hand twined in the rein that she had snatched from the steward's hand. Harrick sat like a statue, but with mischief in his eyes, looking at her; the blood trickling down his chin and tinging the borders of his close black whisker.

His master thanked him warmly, and Ralph, coming up, re-echoed the praise bestowed upon him.

Mrs. Fairhoe seemed to have gained time for reflection. With the haughty face set in all its pride, but with a modulated voice, she thanked him too, and asked if he would help her to remount. She was more mistress of herself now; her irrational repugnance was gone, or, at all events, the absurd fear that had accompanied it; she thought, as she rode back by Oswald's side, that she would make this obligation the means of learning what the steward knew that she had yet to learn.

The peril and the exercise had quickened her stagnant blood; she laughed at herself for having fancied that the man's looks were such as she had been ready to resent. "This comes of my morbid brooding," she muttered to herself. "He would not dare to advance further than I chose in any confidence that I may seek with him; and if he *should* dare, I am mistress here."

Who can hope, nay, who would dare, to recount the whole of that course by which this proud, selfish defiant lady felt herself drawn by degrees into a confidence with a man whom she regarded at first as the

mere lackey of her husband, or, at all events, as no more than an upper servant on the land on which she was undisputed mistress ? It would be the record of a bad man's secret thoughts and artful schemes—a narrow-brained mean scoundrel's vile passion, which was subdued by a strong dogged will till every speech and almost every look, when he was in the company of her against whom it set itself, was a separate little plot.

He was often with her now in those daily rides which she would take while her husband was dreaming over his books or writing his letters, or away at Grundon with his lawyer. When I say "now," I am speaking of a time long after that day when she rode so desperately. She had asked questions of Harrick, in her own imperious manner, telling him that Lady Flakestone had recommended her to inquire of him about any confidential matter that she might desire to know, and scarcely taking the trouble to frame the inquiries carefully, pretending (she to descend to cajole a servant!) that she desired to find the originator of such scandalous rumours.

How he still kept down his mad passion, which was so intense that it seemed to scorch his soul and made him regard the very object of it with something like hatred; how he humbled himself at the proof of Lady Flakestone's confidence; how he answered, excusing himself, and, with pretended reluctance, yet hinted all that he knew and half that he suspected, and wound around her a web which beginning by a single poisoned thread, grew into a

heavy net that bound her and bore her down before him, it would be impossible to tell without dissecting that man's heart—and that would be an operation from which demonstrator and observer would alike shrink. We have all heard of such things, and some of us know too well how strong an overwhelming desire, whether it be for good or evil, proves to those who at first strive to set themselves against it in their defiant pride. With will using passion for a lever, and pressing gently or heaving with mighty force, what has not been done in the history of the world? Here was a man with some knowledge—more than she could guess—of a secret which might one day crush her; she had no sentiment towards him but dislike, or contempt. She had not yet come to know that lawless thoughts of what might be when he had her in his power were the prime movers in all he said and did; and yet she felt how strongly and how surely he was binding himself to that dark future that lay out of her sight.

Worse than all, she scarcely noted that her husband, too, was growing restless and uneasy; that the slow, measured movement of his dull life had worn him until feverish reaction had set in. That life was not enough for him; he had set himself to a task that not even a healthy and sound-hearted man could have borne without occasional bursts of freedom, confidence, fresh air, sunshine for soul and body. In Oswald, the returning need for healthy life, physical and mental, turned to disease. He became, in his turn, subject to angry suspicions; to dark mistrusts; and crushed the

half-formed monsters down and would not heed them—crushed them down instead of casting them out by prayer, and love, and faith. They took no definite shape for months, for years even, and then—then they suddenly assumed a form, and confronted him, or looked out of his eyes distorting and discolouring all things.

Time passes quickly under great misery as under great joy. The years speed on, the seasons come and go, and seem to mock at man, who thinks that he alone abides.

For months and months this man and woman fought against themselves and each other; for years James Harrick—nursing his desperate passion when it had grown old, and might have died but for its having taken the form of a settled, dogged purpose from which he would not turn—tossed, sleepless, on his couch at the cottage where he lived, and often sought to drown the sense of his baffled schemes by deep potations.

He was thin and haggard, burnt by an internal smouldering fire that sometimes leaped to flame. He was waiting for some news that he had sent far to seek when all certain information had failed. He would have launched the bolt long ago if it had been forged, but nothing could supply the missing link.

The same dread secret that had been between son and mother now lay between husband and wife.

It was early spring-tide, and the mornings were fresh and bright when the message came for which Harrick had waited so long. He was sitting, haggard and un-

shaven, his head leaning in his hands, an unlighted cigar between his lips, when the postman, who had come from the hall, stopped his pony at the door and gave him a letter. His hands trembled as he tore it open, for he had seen the postmark at a glance, and was eager to see what it might contain.

Harrick sat looking at the writing long after he had read it, but at last jumped up with a great shout, or rather a yell.

He shaved with a trembling hand, but dressed rapidly, and had the saddle on his horse before the postman had delivered his next letter, two miles off. Then he trotted over to the hall, and sent word to the groom to get Mrs. Fairhoe's horse ready, for his lady would ride before breakfast. Then he caught Mrs. Fairhoe's maid as she was tripping across the hall—caught her so suddenly that she giggled and said, "Law, Mr. Harrick, how you do squeeze one!" and despatched her to tell her mistress that he had the horse ready, and that it was a delightful morning for a ride.

He paced up and down the hall, scarcely knowing where he was, and striking his boot so loudly with his whip that it was well Oswald had himself gone out of the house.

His lady came down presently in her riding-dress, but looking stern and almost savage.

"Who gave you orders to call here and send me a message?" she asked, as she confronted him. "I can ride alone, and will dispense with your company this morning." He smiled with that ugly look which she

had often noticed in him, and whispered in her ear.

They were riding in a mere bridle path, when he told her what he had heard that morning with such an evil look of familiar insolent triumph in his face, that she told him to pass on; and he obeyed, stopping his horse at some distance, and looking back to watch her as she read.

Neither of them saw another watcher, who, hearing the horses' feet, had paused in his walk amidst the trees, and now looked at them both with flashing eyes.

It was his master—her husband!

Neither of them noticed him. She turned her horse's head homeward, beckoning Harrick to follow, and stopped at the edge of the wood, waiting till he came up.

Proofs! Proofs! She must have proofs! If this were true, and not all a cunningly-devised lie of Harrick's—and she half believed it—her husband, his master, must have some papers that would tell her all. He (Harrick) knew where all the private books were kept in that room into which she never entered. Mr. Fairhoe would be out that day after dinner; he could come and help her in the search; and woe be to him if she found that he had lied. He laughed at her—laughed loud and in a coarse tone that reached the ear of that pale man who strode through the dewy grass beyond the belt of trees.

"I'll be there at eight o'clock to-night, then," he said, wheeling his horse and clearing the low hedge

that skirted the roadside meadow. "Alone! alone with me, and there!" he said to himself in a hoarse chuckle; and using his spurs, dashed away across the fields.

He was punctual, and had lost all the strange excitement of manner which he had been unable to control in the morning. He was carefully dressed, too, and trimly brushed, and his cambric handerchief was scented, as the footman remarked to himself, when he announced that master was gone over to Grundon, but Missis she gave orders for him to please go up stairs to the drawing-room.

He followed with his pulses beating, while his heart seemed to stand still or to have gone into his head. He was about to play the great stake in his game with the devil.

That pale, proud woman received him without a word, pointed to a seat and to the wine which was still on the table. He would have advanced to speak to her; but she stopped him by a gesture of the hand, and then, as he stood irresolute, took the lamp from the table and led the way down stairs.

"Here are the keys of the drawers," she said, taking a bunch from her bosom; "those of that bureau he has with him, but, if necessary, it must be broken open, or the lock picked; you know how to do that, I dare say."

He was almost mad at the taunting tone of her voice, and broke into an oath.

"What am I to get for this," he said, "that you talk that way; do you know what I've been waiting for

and watching myself and you for these months and years? Let us understand one another, for I've a devil in me that won't bear hard words, and we're here alone."

"I know it," she said, looking him full in the face; "you are here to find what I want; or, rather, what I would rather die than find. We shall see what will come of it when I have to ask you for further help."

There was nothing in the drawers but deeds and papers, with here and there an old faded manuscript poem written long ago. The search was tedious, and the lamp seemed to grow dim as they untied bundle after bundle. The room was damp and cold, and the sun had set, with swift, lashing hail, and cold rain, which beat upon the house and pattered in sudden gusts against the window.

"It's no use looking here, better open the other thing at once," muttered Harrick, as he moved the flaring lamp. One of the larger keys fitted the lock, but would not turn, and he had given it a sudden wrench, so that the bureau opened, and several papers fell with a ghostly rustle, and fluttered in the draught that poured into the room from the ill-fitting door. Whether it was this or a sort of cold shudder that seemed to run through the air as the sound of the rain suddenly ceased and was succeeded by a stillness almost startling that caused Harrick to look up at his companion, who can tell?

He did look up, and saw that her eyes were staring at the window to which her dead-white face was turned.

Following her glance, he saw what caused him to cry out with an inexplicable terror.

Another white face—a child's—was outside, pressed against the pane, its lineaments so still and wan that they might have been those of death.

BOOK II.

VALENTINE DAY;

OR,

THE STORY OF A VAGRANT.

CHAPTER I.

I TAKE MY FIRST PEEP AT THE WORLD.

Nobody knew exactly how old I was, but everybody thought it would have been better if I had died before my having lived at all was a matter of complete certainty. The circumstances of my birth were entirely conjectural; but there was no doubt whatever of the fact that I wasn't wanted.

If anybody had taken the trouble to consult me in that previous state of existence of which some of us have occasional glimpses in our unhappy childhood, I think I should have declined to appear in my character of a forlorn workhouse foundling; but, as all that took place towards that end was completed without my knowledge, I had no opportunity of expressing an opinion, and, consequently, there I was, a pauper infant in Grundon Union.

I cannot remember when I first woke up to a knowledge of my condition, any more than I can tell when I first became aware that there was a world outside the dirty yellow walls of the nursery ward. If children have any reflections beyond a mere memory of the sensations of yesterday, I fancy I must have felt a confused impression that I was there by some accident

which would one day be succeeded by a mysterious event that would take me out of that ward as suddenly and unexpectedly as I had come into it. I think I remember wondering whether this would happen in my sleep, and whether I should wake some morning to find myself elsewhere, with only strange faces round me.

Sometimes my speculations took the opposite turn, and I fell to thinking that this very existence might be part of the other dreams that visited me so often, as I lay on my little blue-check-covered iron bedstead, and that I might find that I was really somebody's child, with a mother to watch over me, and to take my hand when I shook off a long sleep wherein I had forgotten all my real life. These fancies were short and fleeting enough, for the realities of Grundon Union were too distinct to be permanently affected by such childish moods; and there were so many round me to whom life had brought no better consolation than to live in this dull prison-house that I had no warrant for believing in a better lot than that of wearing away my days there until I grew bolder and was big enough to be transferred to some master who would never forget that I had no business in the world, and would do very little towards teaching me one in return for the premium paid by the parish for getting rid of me.

Of course, the knowledge of my probable future implied in this supposition came later when I had been handed over from the bare room with the big fire, which was called the nursery, to the barer room with no fire at all, which was known as the boys' dormitory.

When it did come I used to ponder on it as I lay shivering beside a sleeping bedfellow, who, being older and stronger than I was, had monopolised the thin blanket and the thinner counterpane; and while I looked up at the high, narrow windows and saw the cold, grey light break over the dark tree-tops of the churchyard, I almost wished that I was one of those few aged inmates who had come to regard the graves in the paupers' corner without fear or repugnance, because there they would rest from their troubles until they woke in a world wherein they declared that there would be no cold, cheerless nights, no craving hunger, which burnt skillee could not gratify, no punishment diet, no rheumatism, and no chilblains.

This churchyard had much to do with my solitary brooding over the unknown past and possible future, and I can only account for its influence by the fact that my first conscious glimpse of the outer world was bounded by the low wall which enclosed its white gravestones and the long row of sombre yews that led by a damp, weedy path to that big square block of stone on the north side of the church, and surrounded by a tall, rusty iron railing.

It was towards this object that my attention had been directed by nurse Purley one cold, wintry day, when I had previously been regaled on a slice of warmed-up currant-pudding; and whether the circumstance was really fixed in my memory by the pudding, or whether I have since heard that it happened in the Christmas week, and so confound the occasion with the recollection of some rare luxury that should have

marked a later period, is still a question. But all circumstances worth remembering in workhouse life have some relation to food or warmth, the most remarkable and interesting event in such a place being that which can effect some alleviation of common and constant wants. However this may have been, I was just old enough to understand Nurse Purley and to waddle along the floor of the ward, when I was hoisted to the high window-sill and shown, from between the iron lattice that guarded the panes, a long black procession of men, and horses, and coaches, winding along by that low wall beyond the yews, whose shaggy branches were borne down with snow, and looked like huge blackbirds with white-flecked wings.

I made no such comparison at the time, for I had seen no huge birds; but I saw the same trees many a winter afterwards, and thought this was their appearance, as the snow lay thickly upon their sheltered sprays long after it had melted elsewhere. I came to like to watch them under this aspect, and to give rein to my morbid fancies, and to think of all the things that I had read about foreign countries, by which I might make out of the scant talk and still scanter reading of some of the older paupers a world of my own from the materials of that dreary place, where few changes of the seasons seemed to alter the aspect that belonged to death. Being on my first acquaintance with it, a new region, only revealed by means of my perilous and uncertain elevation to the window-sill, I was, I suppose, conscious of very little else than the procession of black horses, men, and coaches, and of

the tolling of the church bells; but I was gravely informed that it was a funeral; that there was a lady in that long black coach on her way to the "pithole;" that her name had been Fairhoe, and that her son, who afterwards appeared standing at the great square block of stone (underneath which I had reason long after to remember lay the "pithole") was Mr. Fairhoe. He had a long black cloak reaching down to the ground, and held a white handkerchief to his face; and I was told not only that he lived in a big house in the country where there was no "pithole," but that he kept pigs, and had meat for dinner every day, and pudding afterwards. I don't know that the knowledge of this diminished my surprise at finding long afterwards that he was mentioned in the Psalms; but as I had also heard that the Fairhoes were one of the oldest families in the country, I associated him for a long time with those unexplained Scriptural readings of which the Red Sea and the swallowing up of the Egyptians always seemed to form so large a part. This, however, is another digression, and belongs to a later period of my early history—little wonder that even now I should be glad to hasten my reminiscences of all the sordid and sickening details of that life which has blighted so many helpless children and confirmed the vicious dotage of so many aged men and women.

I deliberately exclude Nurse Purley from any distinguished share of the dogged hatred and mistrust with which even the very infants learned to regard those who, but for her interference, would have been able and willing to make even their little lives an

insupportable burden. She was a fat, soft, plaintive old woman, with her eyebrows always raised, as though in despair of calculating how many disregarded units were constantly being added to the great human sum; but though she was melancholy, and sometimes fretful, she was never morose, and her tears flowed almost as freely for real pain and distress as they did for the sorrows of the heroes of a series of tattered romances with which she relieved the intervals of nursing and "bringing up by hand."

Poor old Mrs. Purley is the one figure of all that time which stands out to relieve the dreary memory of cruelty and blind neglect which makes the record of my first experiences. Looking back now at her, as she sat, like a great soft cushion, in the low, capacious, wooden nursing-chair, before the nursery-fender, I can fancy that she in some way associated me with those sentimental stories in which she found so much delight; and on one occasion of especial favour and unusual emotion, she even went so far as to say that my fair, wavy hair, and blue eyes, and a certain smoothness and delicacy of complexion that distinguished me from the four other children under her charge, was a sign that my mother, at all events, was no common woman.

It is true that she afterwards tempered the remark by assuring me that, whoever I was, I wasn't wanted, as was evident from certain marks which were visible on my neck near the shoulder, and seemed to be the impress of fingers which had left an unfading bruise. I had been promoted to a jacket and trousers of the

sort which, being appropriate to the workhouse uniform, were known as a skeleton suit, when she imparted this information; but she also exhibited to me a small parcel, carefully stowed away in a drawer, and containing the still more scanty, but finer and handsomer garments, which had embellished my babyhood, when I was brought to that house by one of the guardians "on a Valentine's Day as ever was."

I don't know that I was ever so satisfied with the name that had been bestowed upon me as when I heard that I had received it at the instance of the only friend that I had ever known, and I clung to Mrs. Purley with all the affection and gratitude that can be left to an infant under poor-law discipline. I think I loved her dearly, and the memory of her kindly nature, unaltered amidst all that would have hardened and embittered many a more pretentious sensibility, lives in my heart to this hour.

"I do wish as I could find out who was your mother, Vally;" she said to me one day, as I sat watching her just as she had come to the end of a greasy volume, and was thoughtfully looking into the fire as though she traced some resemblance between me and the hero of her own or the author's fancy. "I know by them clothes that she warn't no common person, and you *must* be like her; jest the sort o' likeness as follers arter the mother's side, I should say."

Oh, that mother! how often had I to lie awake thinking of her, and wondering whether the hands that made those dainty little garments, so discoloured now, and so sweet with the scent of dried lavender in

Mrs. Purley's drawer, had ever fondled and caressed me, as I had seen even coarser hands caress the little ones that clung to them, on those rare occasions when I had caught a glimpse of the world of Grundon streets outside the heavy iron-shod door that shut my own world away from light and life.

I thought of all this vaguely, as a child will dwell on the things that are but half realities to its waking reason, and amidst such dreams was too often conscious of those strange finger marks upon my skin, and wondered what was their meaning, and whether the same hand had left its imprint there.

I had no answer to give to Mrs. Purley, but I felt my heart swelling, and a great lump come up in my throat as I leaned my head upon my hands crouching on the little wooden stool over which I had stumbled from babyhood to boyhood. Only when I felt her fat hand stroking my head did the relief of a great burst of tears come to my aid, and, hiding my head in her flannel lap, I sobbed out in reckless indifference to tenses, "You've been the only mother I shall ever have, Nurse Purley, ma'am."

The good old soul had me on her knee in a moment, and began to sob in company, holding me tight against her blue-check bosom, where I had so often been hushed to sleep before the advent of that hated grey frieze skeleton suit.

"Do'ent ye now, do'ent ye give way, my little fellow," she said, soothingly, "becos it's what we must all on us come to one day, and life's made up o' such partin's, as the sayin' is; not but what I'll come odd

times, may be, and see you for all Mrs. Scraper; but my daughter she wants me, and I'm no good here when there aint no little ones. God help them as I leave behind, I say. Oh dear! oh dear! drat the boy, he's gone and made me take on that dreadful that I dun now what I shall do when I come to go down for my money."

I had been smitten with a sudden shock, an undefined, awful fear, which seemed to make my heart shrink up again, and to blot out even the little sunlight that sometimes struggled through that great cold window, to gild the dingy walls of the nursery ward.

"Mrs. Purley, oh! Nurse Purley, ma'am, you aint, don't go to say that you're——"

"I'm a goin', Vally. I must, my dear. There—there do'ent; drat the boy. Bless his poor, little soul, how he do take on, and I'm wuss myself. I'm a goin'. It wouldn't make no odds, Vally, for there ain't no more little creeturs here for me to nuss, and you'd ha' gone down to Mrs. Scraper to-morrow, any ways. The others have gone a'ready; don't you know that. There's Nancy's to be put to the wash-tub now that there ain't no more infants on the parish; and Paddy Carey and Mulligan Carey, and Weevil, they've all gone down to Mrs. Scraper yesterday; and you'll be at school best part o' your time, Vally, an' learn ever so much more than I've ever taught you."

"Hoity! toity! what's all this?" said a voice that sounded like the grating of a rusty hinge, and belonged to Mrs. Scraper herself, whose lean body and bony arm followed her sharp face in at the door. "Why,

Missis Purley, marm, I thought as you'd gone down long ago. The gentlemen's a-waitin' with your money, and I come to clear up a bit. I reckon we shan't have no more nusseries now; and, if people will go an' have brats, they'd better put 'em out of our way, at any rate. This is to be turned into a infirmary now, bless yer; an' Mr. Swiffle he's to be appointed reg'lar, under the master, to physic 'em by contrack. That's the way to do bisniss; not as he'll git much out o' the system; leastways, if he do, he's a deal cleverer than other people."

Mrs. Scraper looked so spiteful as she said this, and rubbed her nose till it grew so red, that I sat quite still, knowing from former experience that she would presently seek some object on which to visit her secret wrath. My precaution was useless, for her eye was already upon me—a half-closed, short-sighted, blood-shot grey eye.

"So this is another on 'em, is it?" she said, grimly, folding her arms before her and rubbing her elbows. "He's a snivellin', too, is he? Well, he'd better get down stairs, and save his tears agin he wants 'em; and that won't be long fust, I'll lay. You've been a good deal too soft with 'em, Missis Purley; and that'll make it all the wuss. Workuses aint the places for down pillers and melted butter, as well I knows it if anybody does, with a parcel o' greedy, ravagin' young wultures a eatin' your wery substance with riotuous livin', an' no extras allowed out o' the contrack; not so much as a penny a head, an' milk the price it is."

At the word milk Mrs. Purley jumped up, and I

thought she would have done battle there and then with Mrs. Scraper, whose inroads upon our allowance of milk, and the substitution of water for a certain quantity abstracted before the great brown jug found its way up stairs, were a daily source of disagreement; but even in the moment of her anger, the nurse saw me sitting there and checked her temper, even though Mrs. Scraper accompanied her observations with a scornful laugh.

"You run down stairs now, Vally, my dear," she said to me, gently guiding me to the door with her soft hand upon my head. "I've got something to say to Mrs. Scraper, and you can wait to see me outside the board-room door."

I don't know what the good creature's intention may have been, but if she made any attempt to plead on my behalf with Mrs. Scraper I fear her intervention was of little value, for I had scarcely got half way down the great staircase when I saw that lady's head over the iron baluster, and found that she was waiting till I reached a turn in the stairs, when she called out, "Hi! You! Don't you think to go snivellin' about when you're along o' me, becos I wont have it. I'm just a comin' down presently to cut them fancy curls off, and see what your skin's made on, with a bit o' wholesome yeller soap; so don't let me ketch you out on the stairs. I ain't agoin' to make no differences, indeed; I ain't paid for differences, and I can't afford no time for favourites, nor yet novvles; no, nor yet fat an' laziness, an' so I tell yer."

It was thus that Mrs. Purley passed out of my

world and left me unfriended, with the few rays of love and hope that had begun to brighten my childish life eclipsed in the dark ward where my companions were already huddled together in fearful anticipation of being cut the shorter in their daily allowance by my sudden and unexpected appearance."

CHAPTER II.

I TAKE A LEAP IN THE DARK.

From the day that I was transferred to the care of Mrs. Scraper, my practical acquaintance with life may be said to have commenced. My tears were rough-dried on a vicious jacktowel that hung behind the door; my hair was cut into irregular ridges by a blunt and creaking pair of scissors; and, as I had delayed my departure from the nursery-ward by staying to take leave of Mrs. Purley, I only came into the reversion of a fragment of cold, hard suet pudding, faintly tinted with treacle.

I had several companions in misfortune, and, though there was little sympathy between us, and especially towards me as the consumer of the remnant of cold dough which had been the object of so many longing, hungry glances, we had at least the sort of interest in each other that comes of a community in suffering, and sat huddled together for mutual warmth until it was decided what should be our destination.

It would have been a curious sight for a professed philanthropist, that group of ill-clad, half-fed children, some of them scarcely past infancy, shivering with an undefined dread of the future which the State had pre-

pared for them, and knowing instinctively that everybody with whom they had to do would regard their very existence as an offence for which they were to be punished by the sort of neglect that might be shown to a stray dog, that it was unadvisable to kill outright, but whose death by "natural means" would save a great deal of inconvenience. There were few of the indications that generally belong to happy childhood, and, though some symptoms of the beauty which will flourish even under such imperfect conditions as those of the nursery-ward were not wanting, some of the hopeless faces belonging to those who had been longer under the Scraper discipline already wore the dull, suffering, and yet sharpened look that belongs to pauperdom.

Only two of the companions of my infancy, with Mrs. Purley, had a claim upon my regard. One of these was a loose-jointed, shambling, slattering girl of fourteen, who was known indiscriminately as "Liza" or "that gal," never having established her right to any other name. She had been sent from another workhouse which had been merged in that of Grundon, and, having a natural aptitude for conciliating restless infants, had found her way into our nursery-ward, when she was but a child herself, as coadjutor to Mrs. Purley.

She having been removed to the laundry, whence I sometimes saw her emerge, all stone-blue and soap-suds, my only resource for society was Weevil.

Weevil's father had never been heard of; his mother had died the day after she had crawled to the work-

house-gate—died in giving him birth, and without leaving word or token of her real name or home. He was a year older than I, and, like the great men of antiquity, from the Greek and Roman heroes down to the Norman and Saxon warriors, took his title from some supposed affinity between it and his personal appearance. Whether he had been originally called Weevil or Weasel was not of sufficient importance to be a subject of inquiry; but he was a small, spare, active little fellow, with a sharp, cunning face, bright, peering eyes, and a quaint, good-humoured expression, in which a look of premature age was curiously blended with a humorous alertness.

It was quite wonderful what an acquaintance Weevil had picked up with the manners and customs of the outside world. When we went out, which was but seldom, he seemed to catch sight of everything, and, in spite of the repressive presence of the relieving officer—a wooden-legged man, who marshalled our dozen or so of grey frieze legs with the aid of a penny cane—whispered remarks which were to the last degree astonishing.

Weevil never lost an opportunity of talking to the old men and women of the house whenever he could slip away unperceived by Mrs. Scraper, and he confided to me that he had even penetrated to the stone-yard, where occasional tramps and beggars worked out a night's lodging and a bowl of gruel.

It must have been from these united sources that he obtained, not only his remarkable knowledge of the world, which extended even to the life of London

streets, but also the extensive vocabulary by which he sometimes illustrated his reflections.

The time came, however, when some portion of our day was devoted to such learning as the schoolmaster, who was also the master of the oakum-room—where we, with some of the female paupers, sat, in a faint, hot atmosphere, redolent of tar—could impart to us. Little as this was, it opened a new existence to us—our childish miseries were somehow lightened by the bright revelations of the stories that were interspersed in the spelling-books, a dozen of which, having been bought a bargain by one of the guardians, were devoted to our education.

When Weevil learnt to read a little it was wonderful how rapidly he accumulated a small library, consisting of cuttings from newspapers, dilapidated song-books, odd numbers of forgotten magazines, and, boon most precious of all, an ancient, leather-bound, dog's-eared volume of perils and adventures at sea, lent him, with many injunctions, by Liza, whose sole possession it had become by inheritance from a poor bed-ridden old sailor, who, having subscribed out of his hard-earned pay for some twenty years towards the support of Greenwich Hospital, was left, lame and disabled, to the tender mercies of the poor law, and died for want of a pair of crutches.

"Reading, writing, and ciphering to the Rule of Three," was the scope and limit of our educational course; and it is astonishing how many years we took to accomplish it. Perhaps the transition from a scanty meal of skillee and bread to the warm flavour of the

oakum-room was unfavourable to mental exertion, or the pale, melancholy, scarred face of the master may have had some deterrent influence, especially when we heard that he had been a prison warder. His cane was seldom idle for a day together, though he never struck cruelly, and was satisfied to bring a little cloud of oakum dust out of a frieze jacket with a couple of strokes; but it was his manner to repel the least advance, and even Weevil could scarcely look him in the face. Whatever may have been the reason, we learnt but slowly, and our very books and slates seemed to gather an unwholesome complexion with much knuckling, as though they, too, were subject to the law of physical force and could do nothing without hard usage.

There is nothing to record in the pauper life. It is a mere calendar of petty pains, penalties, and wants; short meals, miserable, sordid details, in which days, and hours, and weeks, and years subside into the dull routine which blots out the sense of liberty and seems to abolish time.

A day came, however, when even this dead pool was stirred, though not by any angelic messenger; and, as it was in the old time at Bethesda, each crippled, stunted soul thought how its selfish wants might be affected by the change, and waited wistfully to seize upon such slight advantage as should give them a preference over the rest.

"I say, here's a go," said Weevil to me, one morning as we went out to the oakum-room after breakfast, masticating the last half of a slice of stale clayey

bread by the way; "there's a noo master an' mattern a comin', name o' Slokeum, and the old uns is goin' away."

It may have happened that as the news came on a Monday we were less interested than we should have been on any other day in the week; for the influence of Sunday was upon us, and we were all dizzy and stupid from the weariness which seemed to be the general result of such religious observances as we were expected to take a part in.

These consisted mostly of a repetition of the Psalms, and a general echo of the responses, from an elevated position in a series of hard straight-backed seats above the gallery, on each side the organ loft in the church. I never shall forget the giddy horror with which I first found myself at this remote height, or how I clung to my seat in the expectation of being impelled by some unseen power over the front of the gallery and into the body of the church—a terror heightened by the sensation of having the organ in my head, where its last vibrations alternated with scraps of the sermon, the mere beginnings of sentences which, having begun in a loud and sonorous tone, faded into a mere buzzing whisper at the end. On that particular Sunday I was so conscious of the booming and buzzing and the faint warm flavour of fustian and coke fires which found its way into those remote heights where there was no outlet, that I felt my head going round, and, knowing that I must either shriek out presently or find my way into the air, had crept under the seat, and so crawled away to the door where I hoped to escape attention. The

great, broad, oaken staircase of the gallery was so full of wooden echoes, however, that I fancied every foot-fall would be heard within the church; and, though I lowered each hobnailed boot gently in its turn, every stair resounded like the slamming of a door, and caused me to stand still in terror. It was during one of these pauses that I became aware of the presence of a short, thick-set, black-browed man who stood just within the lower door, with his hat in his hand, and an air of profound attention, as though he could hear what was going on inside. His hair was cropped quite close over his temples, but hung down in a straight fringe upon a bulgy forehead; his eyes were half closed, and his thick lips pursed into a pompous and self-satisfied expression; but I knew in a moment that he was looking at me, and when he raised a fat fore-finger and solemnly beckoned me to come down, it was no more than I expected.

"So you've been a sneakin' out o' church, have yer?" he said, in what was intended to be a whisper, but was really a hoarse murmur, that seemed to come from somewhere at the back of his head; "you just come along o' me," he added, taking me by the ear and drawing me outside, in spite of my resistance and protestations of innocence.

"What d'ye expect 'll become of yer?" he said, still in the same hoarse murmur, and accompanying his question with a cuff on the temple that made my head reel; "where's yer religion?" A balancing cuff on the other side. "Hold yer tongue; if yer cry out I'll half skin yer."

There was something so awful in being buffeted from side to side and spun round and nearly knocked down and knocked up again, and to have to endure all this from a stranger whose very whisper foreboded remote consequences in the way of punishments not yet dreamed of, that, had it lasted a moment longer, I should have given vent to my pent-up feelings in a desperate yell, especially as he had by that time pushed and cuffed and hoisted and pinched me quite away from the church-gate to the broad damp walk leading to the pauper corner of the burial-ground. Here, in a sudden effort to back behind a grave, and so get out of his reach, I fell over something, and, as he had not yet done with my ear, dragged him down with me into a clay puddle, where I rolled out of his hands.

We were both up again in a moment, and the cause of our accident was up too, and now stood looking at us, with angry, bloodshot eyes, across the grave upon which he had been lying on his face when I fell over him.

He was a pale young man, so worn and thin, and with such neglected clothes and hair, that he might have been asleep there with the dead for years, and have awakened from his long trance with no thought but anger against those who had come to disturb him. His hat lay on the ground, and his hair, long and matted, fell around a face so lean and bloodless that his eyes seemed to have no power to shut, and had a glassy look in them that resolved itself into no particular expression, but stared wildly out at us as

though we had not yet taken any definite place in his thoughts. His hands were clenched beneath the tattered cuffs of the old velveteen coat that he wore, and, from the movement of his white lips, he seemed to be muttering something to himself, though no sound came from them.

"If you're a casual, I hope as you'll be gone before I come," I heard my antagonist murmur as he shrank back in alarm from the figure of this man, who had risen so suddenly from the ground that he might have startled anybody of only average courage.

He turned as though he would have spoken; but, perhaps, finding that no answer was expected of him, and that the person who had addressed him was already on his way back towards the church, he fixed his eyes on me with the same wild, unmeaning gaze, and, having picked up his hat, turned slowly round and walked away until he reached the low wall, over which he disappeared.

By the time that I was able to remove my attention from the place where he had vanished the congregation had begun to leave the church, and I saw Weevil and the Mulligans coming cautiously out of the porch, followed by the rest. I made haste to join them before the appearance of the schoolmaster, trying to rub some of the clayey mud from my cap and jacket-sleeves as I ran; but before I reached the gate I saw that he was standing just inside the doorway, where my late adversary held him by the button, and was evidently directing his attention to me as I came along.

"Please, sir, it was all him," I said, appealing to the teacher, whose face wore an uneasy as well as its usual stern expression. "He caught hold of me as I was coming out, and went and knocked me about for nothing."

The master frowned and motioned me to be silent. As I slunk behind the little shivering group of my companions I saw him touch his hat to the stranger, and then, turning to us, he gave the word to march home.

"What made you go out of church, Vally?" he said, not ungently, and using that abbreviation of my Christian name for the first time.

"I was sick, sir; and if I hadn't crawled out on the floor I should have tumbled over, I was so hot and giddy." This explanation being verified by Weevil, who sat next me, I could see the frown relax a little; then, as he took my hand and laid his finger on my pulse, I noticed his face contract with a sort of grimace. Keep as quiet as you can to-day, my boy, and when Mr. Swiffle comes to-morrow I'll tell him to have a look at you. Don't you eat any of that tough—I mean any boiled beef for dinner. I'll give you some bread and butter if you'll come down to me."

On this occasion, however, I had no opportunity for indulging either in the beef, against which my own stomach had warned me, or the bread and butter offered me by the master. A report of my offence of the morning had, by some mysterious means, reached Mrs. Scraper before my return from church, and I was

assigned a hard stool in the corner of the room and a couple of slices of the very stalest bread, washed down with a little "beef-liquor," as a repast, for which I was told I ought to be more than thankful.

I sat in my corner for the greater part of the day; for no amusements were permitted in the wards on Sundays, unless somebody could procure a tract or a sermon with which to beguile the tedium of the long hours from noon till sundown. Weevil had contrived to slip away unperceived, and only came up for the mug of weak milk-and-water and the bread-and-treacle which arrived before bedtime. I slunk away supperless, for I had half my dinner-bread in my pocket, and I felt too sleepy to call attention to my having been overlooked. No wonder that I was broad awake directly I lay down on the flock mattress, and that, after several hours of fitful sleep and fevered tossing, I had no curiosity to learn more of the reported arrival of the new master and matron. And yet their presence turned out to be the very mainspring, the motive power, that changed my whole life.

I was better for breakfast, but had already begun to look forward with loathing to that salt, sickly broth, when the bell rang, and we all hustled into the ward where Mrs. Scraper was already at the head of the table ready to say grace behind a vast yellow bowl, full of the reeking fluid prepared for our nourishment. She wielded the huge wooden spoon with which she was accustomed to fill our small basins; but a large loaf was on the table, and the rations of bread were already dealt out on a scale a little more liberal than

usual. Twelve pairs of hungry young eyes noted this fact at once; probably half as many wondering young observers who also noticed that Mrs. Scraper wore a new black cap ornamented with green ribbons, could not guess what that phenomenon portended.

I was so stupid and heavy that, being already satiated with the odour of the broth, I sat breaking morsels from my bread, and moving my spoon mechanically; my head leaned down towards the table; my hair, which wanted cutting, hung over my flushed face. Presently the harsh voice of Mrs. Scraper waked me up.

"Valentine Day, why don't you eat your soup? You don't mean to say *that* ain't good enough for you, I spose?"

I started; saw the faces at the other side of the table all eagerly engaged on their dinners as though they relished the mess—poor little hypocrites—and was about to make a pretence of falling to, when I was once more startled by another voice at my very elbow.

"Not good enough, eh! Why don't you eat it, you young miscreant? The idea of pamperin' your stomach with food, so that you can't even stay in church, eh! Reg'lar gorged with biliousness an' rich livin', eh! eh! eh!"

The same hoarse whisper that I had heard as I crept out of church the morning before, and now the same finger and thumb closing upon my ear.

I was seized with a kind of convulsion. My iron spoon was at that moment dipped in the scalding

broth, and with a wild cry I threw up my arms in a paroxysm of rage and fear.

Mr. Slokeum, for it was indeed the new master, gave way to his feelings in curses, not loud but deep, as the hot brine splashed into his face; but before he could get at his handkerchief I had risen from my seat, which, as it was a form considerably overweighted at the other end by the twin Mulligans, tilted up and smote him heavily under the chin, at the same time that the Mulligans, suddenly unseated, sought to stay themselves by clutching frantically at the table. It was a flap deal table, and one of them, catching at the supporting leg, brought down the leaf with a bang, and I stood amidst a crash of crockery, a yell of fear, and a cataract of pot liquor.

Mr. Slokeum, purple and profane, spluttered and cursed less loud but still deeper; even turning in his unappeasable wrath upon Mrs. Scraper. The disgust with which he spat out the mere spoonful of broth that had trickled into his mouth was a striking commentary upon his previous opinion on the subject of our dietary.

Not till he had twice stamped his foot and murmured, "Curse it, Mrs. Scraper, ma'am, if that's your name, get me a drop o' water an' something to take this cursed filth out of my mouth and off o' my hands," did that lady go to the cupboard, and from the top shelf produce a green bottle and a glass.

Whatever may have been the liquid which that bottle contained, it was evidently potent, for, after swallowing a glass of it, and with a very little pressing on the part

of Mrs. Scraper (who herself took just a leetle drop, "up to the pretty"), repeating the dose, Mr. Slokeum smiled grimly, and made use of a diaper towel to wipe his face and hands. I had been so suddenly wakened into such few senses as I could command that I noticed all this, and had sidled towards the door in the hope of being able to effect my escape, when Mrs. Scraper made a dash at me and cut off my retreat until the new master had deliberately buttoned his coat, turned back his cuffs, and seized me by the hair. She then looked on with grim satisfaction while her visitor worked himself into a white heat, and, with one hand twisted in my straggling locks so that he could keep me beyond kicking distance, banged and bruised me till he was tired. He wasn't tired before I had become quite unconscious of his blows, however; and the last words I heard him utter were, "Shamming young dog! Curse him! I'd have his life if the law would let me."

When I began to awake to outward things again, with a hot, bruised face, and a confused ringing of a hundred bells, and a great sound of rushing water in my ears, I was lying, stiff and sore, in a small empty closet, which I remembered led out into the passage near our dormitory; but the door was locked on the outside, and I could not tell how long I had lain there on the floor, though I could see, from the shadows on the wall, that the evening was drawing on.

While I was watching the fading of the light; darkness seemed to come down quite suddenly, and I began to wonder whether a candle would be brought; then a great fear came upon me, and I speculated whether I

should be left there to die, whether I was supposed to be dead already, and if there was any law that could punish the master for killing me. From this subject my thoughts wandered to that little low shed in the workhouse yard where I had seen the parish coffins go, and which I had heard was the place, where the poor old people who had died were laid out on a bare board until the funeral. Then I fell into a fit of trembling, and in the midst of it rejoiced to hear voices in the corridor, and, as the key turned in the lock, to see the gleam of a candle and recognise two figures at the half-opened door.

"Well, it was all Mr. Slokeum's doin'" said a voice that I knew too well belonged to Mrs. Scraper; "but, lor', there's no knowin' what them boys ain't up to if you humours 'em; not but what you may as well have a look at him, Mr. Swiffle, if so be as you're that way inclined. Mr. Slokeum did give it him, surely; an' richly he deserved it—a rampagious little willin!"

"You see, ma'am," replied Mr. Swiffle, "the schoolmaster, he met me coming in, and says he's been waiting to ask me to have a look at young Day; so that——"

"So that you're a mind to oblige him, 'specially as you did ought to ha' been here yesterday in the mornin', and the Board don't know as you've left till to-night," sniggered Mrs. Scraper.

Mr. Swiffle made no reply, except to mumble something about the duties of his profession, but came to the corner, where I was crouched up in a heap, and, taking me by the arm, asked Mrs. Scraper to leave the

candle on the floor and be good enough to bring him a chair.

As soon as she had left the room, I struggled to my feet and began to implore Mr. Swiffle to have me taken back to the dormitory and put to bed. My jacket and shirt were both torn open, and had left my neck bare. Mr. Swiffle set me against the wall, and, telling me to put out my tongue, lifted the candle with one hand while he put his finger on my pulse. "Don't come any of your nonsense with me, young fellow," he said, peering into my face with his weak eyes; "you ain't hurt much, I dare say; whereabouts do you feel any pain? where's your bruises, eh?" As he spoke I saw that he had caught sight of those marks upon my neck. "Are these some of 'em?" he said, grinning.

"No," I replied, with my tongue half out, and all my blood in my face; "I've always had 'em."

He stripped down my clothes still further, and, as he looked closely at them, I could see the grin fade from his mouth, and he fell back a pace or two to observe me, coming nearer and nearer till his face almost touched mine.

"How old are you?" he said, in a low voice.

"I don't know—somewhere about twelve, I should think; I was brought here about that time ago, so I've heard Mrs. Purley say. Somebody found me and brought me here, she told me."

A strange look came over Mr. Swiffle's face. "We must get him out of this, Mrs. Scraper," he said, recovering himself as that lady came back.

"Can't be; I passed my word as he should stop

here till Mr. Slokeum come to-morrow, and stop he must."

"Well, then, bring in a bed and open that little window; and mind you, Mrs. Scraper, he must have a cup of tea and a good plateful of something to eat, or there 'll be mischief, I can tell you. Manslaughter's a different thing outside to what it is in, mind you."

Mrs. Scraper was evidently impressed with this remark, for she went out again, and presently, Liza came in, dragging a bed and a chair with her. Then she brought a jug and a basin of water and bathed my face. As she was drying it on a towel, she whispered, "Keep your sperrits up, Vally, and look out for me and Weevil to-night when we come to you. Don't take no notice now."

I took no notice, but lay staring at Mr. Swiffle, who helped me to undress and examined the marks that had attracted his attention still more closely. I thought I heard him chuckling.

"Look here, my lad," he said, presently, when we were alone again, "I shall come and see you again to-morrow. Don't you make a row, but just keep quiet here. There ain't much the matter with you, and you'll be as right as possible when you've had what I'll give you. Here, this is brandy," he continued, taking a flask from his pocket and pouring some into a medicine-glass that he carried in a case. "I fill it up with water and you drink it; that'll give you an appetite."

It did; and, though I felt light-headed, I ate so ravenously of the fresh cold meat and bread and butter

that Mrs. Scraper brought in on a plate, that Mr. Swiffle was obliged to moderate my performances. "We'll just put this by," he said, "for you to eat in the morning; and now Mrs. Scraper he'll go to sleep, and I'll be here some time to-morrow; there's no need to turn the key, and I think, ma'am, he'll do very well."

So they left me, and I fell into a profound sleep for what appeared to me to be five minutes, but which was, perhaps, as many hours; for the moonlight was shining in a silver bar through the little single-pane swing window when I heard somebody whisper "Val! Vally, it's me!" I knew the voice; and, after staring and rubbing my eyes, called out, "Come in, Weevil;" whereupon Weevil squeezed himself through the smallest possible space between the edge of the door and the wall.

"There ain't much time, Vally; an' the new master's actially a-comin' home to-morrow mornin'. The new missis is here a-settin' up for him, cos he's comin' in by the night coach. Will you make your lucky along o' me an' Liza?"

"Make my——"

"Yes, we're a-goin'. Liza, she's heard from her relations: keep a corfy-shop in Bagnigge-wells-road in London; and I'm a-goin' with her. We're off in half an hour. Lor' bless you! you'd better come, for that there Slokeum 'll 'arf murder you. You don't know what I've heard tell of him. Will you come?"

"What, run away?"

"Why not? What is there to stop for except wal-

lopin' an' short wittles, and nobody to turn to when Liza's gone. Run away? Yes, like one o'clock."

As though giving a practical commentary on his advice, the church clock struck two.

"It's a reg'lar moonlight night, and I've got a lantern; an', bless yer 'art, we've got no end o' pervisions. I took three parts of a meat pie right away under Mrs. Slokeum's nose, an' she a settin up a snorin by the fire where it was a bein' kept warm in the fender, and there's a end o' candle in the old lantern as Liza found in the wash'us and one o' the ropes out o' the sackin' o' the double bed. Scraper she's out for the night in town; I heard her get leave this evenin', which was what made her in sech a hurry to bring you your supper. Liza's iled the key o' the back door, and we can be over the wall o' the churchyard and half way to London afore anybody's awake. Now will yer, once?"

"What are we to do in London, Weevil?"

"What does anybody do? get a place, or something, we can't tell till we get there. Will yer, twice?"

"But we haven't got clothes nor got money, who's to tell us where to go?"

"I tell yer, it don't matter. Liza's relations is in a corfy-shop, and she's got eleven an' sixpence, an' I've saved up fippence ha'penny beside; it's better to be in London lookin' arter a sitiwation than to be here waitin' for a wallopin' an' half starved. Come the wust, we can but go into a London union, where we're nearer to the Guv'ment, and they'll look arter us better. Will yer, three times?"

I was so ignorant of the functions of the Govern-

ment in relation to pauper children that this last argument decided me.

"Yes."

"Look alive, then, Vally; here, I'll help you on with your things; put yer boots on arter we're outside; an' jest go in an fetch your cap. I'll wait outside here."

I was dressed before the clock chimed the quarter, and had groped my way into the room where my cap hung on a nail behind the door. As I felt for it I knocked my hand against the cupboard door, which had been left open, and, struck with a sudden thought, felt on the shelf for the green bottle, with which I afterwards presented myself to Weevil, who stood at the window at the end of the passage, where the moonlight shone full upon him.

"What's that you've got?" he said, as I tucked the bottle under my jacket. "Oh, my eye! I see; won't that be nobby with the meat pie an' this cold meat that I've just took off your chair on there."

"Weevil," I said, shrinking back for a moment, "ain't it stealing? Oughtn't we to put these back?"

"Oh, yes, I dessay," retorted my companion; "what have they been a stealin' from us neither all this time? What's Scraper got out of our stummicks, and what did they, any on 'em, care if we had our regular meals? Not if there was forty times as much it wouldn't be stealin', with years an' years o' meals to make up. You just come along; an' step softly, if you don't want to wake nobody."

I paused just for one moment as we passed a door in the corridor. It was the door of the schoolmaster's

room, and remembering, not without some notion of childish gratitude, that he at least had tried to be kind to me, I stooped down and kissed it with a whispered "Good-by and God bless you!" Weevil said "good-by," too, in a husky whisper, and then we crept down into the dark, cold, stone hall, where Liza was ready waiting, with a couple of bundles tied up in two ragged pocket-handkerchiefs, and herself bound tightly in a coarse shawl, which, being tied in a knot behind, made her look like a third and larger bundle.

Each of us seized a package; the oiled key turned softly, and then, putting a stone against the door to keep it closed lest we should give the alarm by shutting it after us, we stood outside, where Weevil ran on first to light the candle with the aid of a tinder-box, which was one of our stolen possessions.

Then, after tying the bundles to one end of the rope, this daring adventurer scrambled to the top of the low wall skirting the stoneyard and dividing that and the small strip of scrubby garden ground from the churchyard; thence the provisions were let down, and then, after having helped Liza over, and hearing her drop safely down on the other side, I prepared to follow.

The night was raw and gusty, and a long rack of black, flying clouds chased each other across the sky, and obscured the moonlight, except where it fell faintly on the dark yews in the gravel walk by the pauper corner, and upon the great stone tomb of the Fairhoes just beyond. As I stood crouching upon the wall, the wind blew in a sudden gust and extinguished the candle

in the lantern, so that I seemed about to leap into a fathomless abyss; and, perhaps, with some touch of fever in my blood, thought that it was part of an ugly dream. But presently I heard what I thought was Weevil's voice, at some distance, and in fear lest I should be left alone, made a leap in the dark.

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